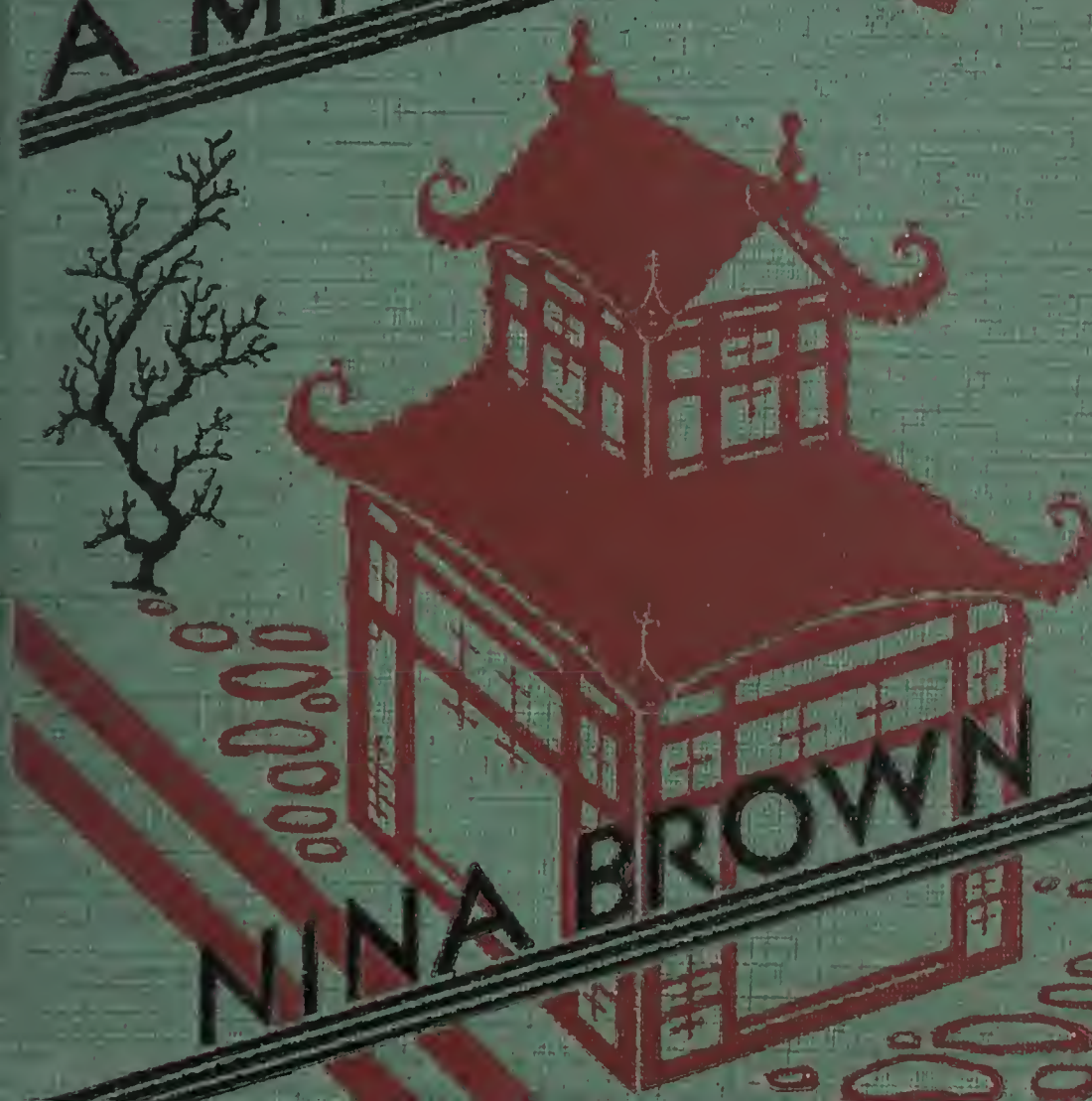


The CHINESE RIDDLE

A MYSTERY STORY for GIRLS



NINA BROWN BAKER



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THE CHINESE RIDDLE

A MYSTERY STORY FOR GIRLS



"ADMIRING MY PAGODA?" - Page 30

THE CHINESE RIDDLE

A Mystery Story for Girls

BY
NINA BROWN BAKER
AUTHOR OF "THE SECRET OF HALLAM HOUSE"

ILLUSTRATED BY
J. CLEMENS GRETTA



BOSTON
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THE CHINESE RIDDLE

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FOR
MY MOTHER

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THE CHINESE RIDDLE

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF THE BRONSONS

“This is your room, Mrs. Bronson. And the girls’ is here; see, there’s a connecting door. I hope you’ll find everything all right.”

Tall, slender Ruth Curtis hovered rather anxiously in the doorway.

“I’m sure we shall, my dear,” Mrs. Bronson answered briskly. “It was the greatest relief when Judge Doyle told me you’d be willing to take us in. The hotel’s impossible, and I really don’t know where else we could have gone.”

“Oh, but we’re glad to have you,” Ruth answered with shy earnestness. “You see, we — well, we really need the money, Mrs. Bronson. Granther’s practice isn’t what it used to be. Most of the people here go up to the city to a specialist when they’re really ill, and the poor patients can’t afford to pay much. So I told Judge Doyle it would help if we could find

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some nice paying guests, and I was glad when he sent you to us. I do hope we can make you comfortable."

"I'm sure you will," Mrs. Bronson replied cheerfully. "We're not hard to please, are we, girls? Why, where did they go?"

"Their window opens on to a little balcony; I think they're out there," Ruth answered. "I must go down and see about supper now; it'll be in about half an hour, if you're ready then."

With her shy smile, she vanished through the doorway.

Mrs. Bronson strolled over to the old-fashioned walnut dresser and took off her tight little hat. The big, shabbily furnished room pleased her. With a smile, she recalled that it had been ten years since she had slept in a bedroom. City rents and her limited budget had made a kitchenette apartment inevitable; her two daughters had grown up with the idea that beds normally disappear into walls. Life in this spacious old house would be a distinct change for them; a pleasant one, she hoped.

She passed through into the second bedroom. It was smaller than the first, though still unbelievably roomy. Gay patchwork quilts cov-

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ered the two white iron beds; the floor was carpeted with smooth, sweet-smelling grass matting. Dresser and washstand had been painted white, and there were two or three wicker rocking-chairs with faded cretonne cushions. The ruffled dimity curtains at the long windows were snowy white and carefully darned. It was not an artistic room by any standards; yet it had a homey, friendly look that breathed of welcome.

From outside the window excited voices hailed her.

“Come and see, Mums — it’s Juliet’s own balcony! There’s even a vine for Romeo to climb.”

The window framed a charming picture.

Barbara Bronson, a sturdy lass of fourteen, could have served as a model for the Athletic Girl. Her shining brown hair was brushed smoothly back from a face glowing with healthy tan. Her gray eyes, steady and fearless, were shaded by long dark lashes tipped with gold. It was a joy to watch her move, for every step and gesture showed the perfect poise of well-trained muscles.

Sixteen-year-old Molly was taller, with a

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willowy slenderness, her dreamy dark eyes looking out from a mist of hair like crinkled black silk. Molly's beauty, though always rather startling to strangers, was accepted in a perfectly matter-of-fact way by the entire family, including herself. Molly knew she was pretty, and was glad of it, but she gave herself no airs on that account.

Babs was happiest in sports clothes; Molly adored ruffles and frills. Barbara rejoiced in strenuous games, while Molly's idea of perfect bliss consisted of soft cushions and a good book. There was almost no way in which the two sisters did not differ; yet they were the best of pals, and they united in deep devotion to their clever, practical mother.

Mrs. Bronson stepped through the window and admired the twisted old trumpet-vine which encircled the balcony rail.

"There's a nice view of the town from here, too," she observed. "Not the business part, but the homes; see the shingled rooftops through the trees? Main Street must be in the other direction. How about it, girls? Are we going to be happy in Pleasant Hill?"

"Of course we are!" Babs threw an arm

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about her mother's waist. "Wait till you get the shop going and all the ladies come flocking in to buy your up-to-the-minute styles. After a while, when you've sold oodles of dresses and made heaps of money, we'll get us one of those cunning little white cottages all smothered in climbing roses and settle down to be leading citizens. It'll be ever so much better than living in that stuffy apartment and your working your head off for Madame Elise, the cross old thing! Just think of having your own shop here and being the boss."

"I am thinking of it." The mother smothered a sigh. It had not been easy, this decision to branch out for herself. She had gone to work for Madame Elise when poor Phil died, ten years ago. She'd been glad enough to get a job as saleswoman then, and she'd worked her way up to be manager. The sharp-tongued Frenchwoman had taught her the business very thoroughly and had paid her well. Perhaps she should have stayed on, not risking this unknown venture. But the girls were in high school now, with college soon to think about—she *had* to have more money.

A dress manufacturer she knew had told her

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of this opportunity. Pleasant Hill was a flourishing town of twenty thousand, without a really good ready-to-wear shop in the place. Rents were low, and the manufacturer offered her liberal credit. Her savings would get her started; she could build up her own business and be independent. It seemed a wonderful chance, and she had taken it.

She had made a flying visit to Pleasant Hill a few weeks before and found just the right location on Main Street. Judge Doyle, the owner, had undertaken to see to the painting and installation of fixtures, while she returned to the city to select her stock. The Judge had suggested that she and the girls would prefer boarding in a private family, and had made the arrangements with Ruth Curtis. And here they were!

“Now don’t let the corners of the mouth droop, Mums,” Barbara admonished her. “*We’re* not weakening, are we, Sis? Everything’s going to be lovely, you’ll see. Has anybody heard any rumors as to when, or whether, we eat?”

The deep-toned note of a mellow Chinese gong answered her before she finished. The

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girls made a rush for the old-fashioned washstand and in a few minutes were standing with their mother at the head of the broad curving staircase.

“Who’s in the family, anyway?” Babs whispered to her sister as they descended.

“I think just that cute-looking girl we saw and her grandfather, the doctor,” Molly answered. “Sh — there they are.”

Dr. Fleming Curtis — affectionately called “the old Doctor” by the whole town — had been a handsome, commanding gentleman once. Now his broad shoulders were stooped, and his hands twisted and gnarled by rheumatism. He leaned heavily on his cane, but his silvery hair was thick and shining, and his sea-blue eyes were very gentle.

The old gentleman greeted the newcomers with stately courtesy, and they passed into the dining-room.

Molly and Barbara glanced about them with frank curiosity as they followed their mother and the Doctor.

The stairway ended in a square hall with three doors. One of these was the front door to the house. The one on the left was open,

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showing an old-fashioned parlor, very stiff and prim with its flowered Brussels carpet and gilded furniture upholstered in faded red satin. This room, as the girls were to learn, was seldom used. Behind it lay the "back parlor," now a more modern living-room, arranged according to Ruth's taste.

Across the hall was the dining-room, spacious and furnished in rather hideous red mahogany. Corresponding to the back parlor on this side of the house was a smaller room which the Doctor used as his study. Another door from the dining-room led to the serving-pantry and kitchen beyond.

"You could get four perfectly good apartments like ours on this floor alone," Babs whispered in awed tones to her sister. "If you ask me, the way they've wasted space around here is simply appalling!"

"Well, I guess they had plenty to spare," Molly whispered back. "Did you notice the yard? A whole block to one house; it's like living in the middle of a park!"

The table was attractively laid with queer blue china and thin old silver, brightened by a great bowl of vivid nasturtiums.

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By the pantry door, his head bowed, his hands hidden in the sleeves of his spotless white jacket, stood an elderly Chinese.

"This is Wang, who looks after our simple wants, Mrs. Bronson," Dr. Curtis said. "Wang, these ladies are the guests we told you about."

Wang raised his head and swept the newcomers with a long, slow glance from inscrutable black eyes. His face had no more expression than one carved from wood. Then he bowed deeply and spoke in a curiously soft, singsong voice.

"It is a happiness to these eyes to behold the friends of the household."

"Well, we're glad to see you, too, Wang," Mrs. Bronson answered kindly. "We'll try not to make a great deal of trouble for you."

They took their seats, and the simple, attractive meal began. Wang served silently and efficiently, then retired to the kitchen.

While her mother chatted to the old Doctor, Barbara shyly studied Ruth, who sat next to her. What was the new girl like? Would she prove a friend who would help them over the first loneliness in a strange town? These were

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important questions to Babs, and she was impatient to know the answers.

Ruth Curtis was about Molly's age, a little past sixteen. Her hair, a rich, warm chestnut-brown, was perfectly straight, and she wore it in a heavy coronet braid wound close about her small head. Her eyes, the exact shade of her hair, were wide and serious. It was a serious, responsible sort of face, anyway, Babs decided. Intellectual, probably. A little frown creased Barbara's forehead. She was not especially fond of intellectual girls. They were always thinking about improving their minds and never wanted to have any fun. It would be disappointing if Ruth proved to be that sort!

Even as the thought formed itself, Ruth turned to her and smiled. And that smile, warm and friendly, lighted her face like a lamp.

"I'm so glad to have some girls in the house — it's lonely here with just Granther and me. You and your sister will be going to our high school this fall, won't you?"

"Yes; tell me about it," Barbara answered eagerly. "We passed the building coming out, I think — a beautiful place, and so big!"

"It's a county school; that's why it has to be

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big," Ruth explained. "The farm boys and girls come in busses. This building was new last year, and we're very proud of it. We have a big gym and a splendid swimming-pool — all the modern improvements."

"Oh, that's grand! Tell me some more. Is there a basketball team? I'm supposed to be rather good at basketball."

"Really? Well, that's good news. Our star forward graduated last year, and the whole team has to be built over. The girls *will* be glad you've come. Does your sister play, too?"

"Mercy, no!" Babs chuckled. "Molly sings and writes poetry and does aesthetic dances. She's the artistic one, you see."

"Oh! Well, that's nice, too. We have a dramatic club and a girls' chorus —" Ruth smiled across the table at lovely Molly, who had caught her last words and now said eagerly, "Tell me about the dramatic club! Do they do musical comedies? I've always been wild for a chance in one."

The three girls chatted so absorbedly then that they were surprised when Dr. Curtis and their mother rose from the table.

"Dr. Curtis tells me our trunks have come,

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girls," Mrs. Bronson observed. "If you aren't too tired, how about doing our unpacking before bedtime? I'll need you to help me at the shop to-morrow, getting ready for the opening, so if we can get this out of the way first —"

"All right, Mums, we'll be right along," Barbara answered promptly. But she turned back for a last word with Ruth.

"You say the school swimming-pool is open all summer? I think that's glorious. Mums won't want us at the shop after the first few days — if you'll take us over then —"

"Of course I will," Ruth answered. "Lots of the girls are out of town for the summer, but you'll meet all the others there, and I know you'll like them. We really have such good times. But you'll see."

Molly smiled her slow, lovely smile. "It's nice of you, Ruth — you don't mind if I call you Ruth right off? You *are* nice to think about introducing us to your friends and making us feel at home so quickly."

"Just what I was going to say," Babs put in. "You know, Ruth — *I* can say Ruth, too? — I was a little afraid at first you were going to turn out a highbrow. You know, with a soul

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above basketball and swimming and such. Really, you've no idea what a load you've lifted off my mind."

Ruth laughed. "And *I* was afraid you two were going to be superior because you're from the city. So you've taken a load off my mind, too."

"It comes out even, then," Barbara said cheerfully. "All right, Mumsy, we're coming. Night, Ruthie — see you in the morning!"

CHAPTER II

THE CHINESE PAGODA

The sisters wakened early to a flood of pale sunlight, and a chorus of bird-song. As Barbara sleepily opened her eyes, they met the sparkling dark ones of her sister in the next bed.

“Listen to that, Babs,” Molly commanded. “Did you ever hear anything like that exquisite high note, over and over? What sort of bird is it, do you know?”

“Haven’t the faintest. Sounds a little different from the elevated, and the milkman rattling his bottles, and all the other wake-up noises I’m used to, though. Is it time to get up?”

Molly glanced at the little clock beside her. “Not for ages; it’s only five thirty. Mums said seven. We mustn’t wake her — she’s in for a hard day, poor dear.”

“Well, I’m wide-awake now.” Barbara

stretched luxuriously and glanced about her. "Cunning room, Sis. I can't get over the *size* of everything! We could give a dance up here. Or shoot deer, maybe."

"Silly!" Molly laughed, then whisked out of bed and softly closed the door to their mother's room. "Now we can talk," she added, as she settled herself cosily against the pillows. "Do you think you're going to like it here, Babs? Seriously?"

"Oh, I know I am! Of course everything's as different as can be, but, when we once get used to it, I don't believe we'll ever want to go back."

"That's the way I feel, too. Ruth's a darling, isn't she? I wish I could take her down to Mumsy's shop and dress her, though. I don't believe she has the least idea about choosing colors to go with that glorious hair of hers."

"You mean that sort of greeny-yellow dress she wore last night?" Babs asked interestedly. "She never chose that color, Sis. It's what the dress faded to. You can't trust green in cheap materials. There's no telling just what shade it will turn."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Molly exclaimed con-

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tritely. "It sounds catty, talking her over like this, and I don't mean to be. I like her a lot, and I was just thinking how really lovely she'd be in the right things. I'd forgotten — of course I knew, too. Judge Doyle told Mums that Dr. Curtis wasn't very well off. And it takes money to dress to suit one's type."

"Money — or a mother in the business," Barbara answered shrewdly. "You and I do pretty well at it, darling, but only because we have chances that every one doesn't get. So before we start criticizing our friends —"

"Oh, don't be so righteous!" Molly interrupted. "Who's criticizing, anyway? Ruth's a darling, whatever she wears, and all I said was — but why go over that again? It seems funny," she went on, "if Ruth and the Doctor are so hard up, that they keep a servant."

"Yes, doesn't it? Maybe Wang doesn't charge much. I've always heard that China-men can live on almost nothing. He's an odd-looking creature, isn't he?"

"He gives me the creeps!" Molly shivered dramatically. "I never knew a human being could be so silent. You couldn't hear him move around the table, and he kept watching us

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with those queer black eyes — I tell you, there's something sinister about Wang!"

Babs laughed delightedly. "Ever since you read those Fu-Manchu stories, you've been looking for a sinister Chinaman. Own up, now; you're just thrilled to death at the chance to live in the same house with one."

Molly's smile was reluctant. "Well, this is the first time I've ever had anything to do with a Chinese, and you do read such weird things about them. I'm not a bit sure I'm going to feel comfy with Wang around."

"Oh, don't be silly!" Barbara answered impatiently. "He's not going to bother us, even if he is a Sax Rohmer villain. What do you say we get up? There ought to be a beautiful sunrise from our Juliet balcony."

In pyjamas and bare feet the two girls perched on the balcony railing. Their room was at the rear of the house, looking south, and would have afforded a splendid view of the sunrise except that that event was long since over. But there were some gorgeous rose and gold clouds to watch, the song of the birds to listen to, and a sweet flower-scented breeze to sniff.

The Curtis house, a square brick building of

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an older day, stood alone upon a small hill. The town had grown in the opposite direction, and the only neighboring structures were a few scattered big houses of the same period, each in its spacious grounds. Little traffic passed through sleepy, unpaved Catalpa Street, with its great trees meeting to form a cool green tunnel. Pleasant Hill's business district was proudly up-to-date, and there were some impressive modern residences surrounding the country club, but Catalpa Street was much as it had been when the town was a straggling country village.

Presently Molly noticed her sister craning her neck to look down in the wide back yard below them.

"What is that thing out there — no, over toward the back fence? You can just see a corner of it when the wind bends the apple-tree branches back. Bright green and rose — there, see?"

Molly leaned far over the rail. Just then a puff of summer breeze parted the leaves of the old apple tree, and she caught a fleeting glimpse that made her clap her hands.

"Oh, how adorable! It's a pagoda, honey.

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Don't you know, we've seen models of them in the museum at home? But how in the world — ”

Babs swung one leg over the railing. “ Let's go see. Of *course* we can shin down the trumpet-vine; it's as easy as a stairway. Oh, come on, Sis, don't be a 'fraidy-cat.”

Molly hesitated. “ But we're not dressed.”

“ Who cares? The nearest house is across the street, and they can't see into our back yard. Nobody's up around here, and I've always wanted to walk barefoot in the dew. So come on.”

She swung herself down the twisted old vine with easy grace, and Molly followed her a little more timidly. The descent was safe enough, and in a few seconds the two sisters were scurry-ing hand-in-hand over the long grass, drenched in silvery dew.

The curious little building was larger than it had appeared from the upstairs window. Its base was an eight-foot square, and the peak of the second smaller roof must have risen a good twelve feet from the ground. There was a wider roof below, giving the effect of two stories from the outside, both roofs gracefully out-

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curving and painted a vivid green. The pagoda was made of wood, brilliantly painted. The walls were deep rose, and the supporting pillars at each corner were bright yellow. The two windows were protected by sturdy yellow shutters, now closed. The one yellow door was closed also, and fastened with a strong-looking padlock.

With its fresh paint glistening in the morning sun, the little house was wholly quaint and charming. The Bronson sisters were standing completely lost in admiration when a gay voice startled them.

“Admiring my pagoda? I didn’t know anybody but me got up this early.”

Ruth had come up behind them. She, too, was wearing pyjamas, but, as the girls noted swiftly, hers were “real” — real Chinese, of dull blue cotton crêpe, perfectly plain except for the black cord frogs which fastened them high at the throat. On her feet were rope-soled Chinese slippers. Her long hair hung in a heavy rope far below her waist, its silken sheen turned to burnished copper by the morning sun.

“Oh, hello, Ruth — is this really yours?” Barbara greeted her eagerly. “We saw it

from the balcony and came down to get a good look. It's darling, but what's it for? "

" Why, it was a playhouse when I was little," Ruth explained. " We use it as a sort of summer-house now — it's a delightful place to read on a hot day. And I come down here every morning to do my upsets, so's not to disturb Granther."

She was fitting a key in the lock as she spoke, and now she threw the door wide open.

The first impression was wholly Chinese. The wall opposite the door, which had no window, was completely covered with Chinese writing, done in bright red brush-strokes on the light unvarnished pine. There were four of these vertical columns, with narrow plain spaces between.

Each of the side walls held a window, and beneath the eastern one was a long, low chest of carved teakwood. Heaped on this chest and spilling on to the floor were pillows, covered in bright cotton with fantastic landscape designs. Under the opposite window stood a little bamboo table with a tea-set and copper kettle on a tray. A short-legged red lacquer tea-table was folded against the painted wall. The floor

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was covered in grass matting, woven in red and white diamond shapes. Red shelves on each side of the door held books and a small portable phonograph.

The ceiling had a domed effect, for the lower roof visible from the outside did not extend through. The supporting beams and timbers had been carved and painted red and black, and from one of them swung a curious little oil lamp of pierced brass.

Ruth was plainly pleased as the girls looked about them with exclamations of delight. She threw the shutters wide to the sweet morning air and motioned them to sit on the cushioned chest, which served as a window-seat.

“I’m so glad you like it! Wang built it for me when I was quite tiny — about three, I think. He did it every bit himself, even the carving. And he paints it every year, inside and out — it’s the joy of his life, I think, to keep it all bright and shining. Well, now for the upsets. Will you girls lounge at your ease and look on, or will you join me?”

“I don’t think I know —” Molly began doubtfully, but Babs laughed.

“Upsets — setting-up exercises, of course!

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I'll join you, Ruth. We used to do them at camp, but I never can remember to keep it up by myself."

Ruth wound the small phonograph, and gay strains filled the little room:

"You've got to bend down, sister,
Bend down, sister!
If you want to keep thin!"

Ruth planted herself in the middle of the floor and began a vigorous bending and stretching exercise. Barbara followed her every move with quick adaptability, and after a moment of fascinated watching Molly caught the fever and joined in. Ten minutes later, rosy and glowing and somewhat out of breath, the three girls cast themselves down upon the chest.

"That was fun!" Molly exclaimed. "Do you do it every day, Ruth? I'm going to, too!"

"Night and morning," Ruth nodded. "It'll be great, having company for it. And of course you girls must use the pagoda any time you want to, whether I'm here or not. I keep it locked at night because of tramps, but it's open all day, and the key is always hanging by the kitchen sink if you want it. Just make

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yourselves at home in here any time." She glanced at her wrist-watch. "Oh, it's almost seven — I must run. I'm helping Wang get breakfast, and I don't want your mother to be late because of me."

"We must hurry, too, and get dressed," Molly observed. "We're going down with Mums and help her unpack and get the shop ready. She hopes to open for business tomorrow."

"How interesting!" Ruth led the way toward the house. "Will you girls help her in the shop?"

"Only till she gets things going. She's engaged an alteration woman here in town, and she doesn't expect to need any one besides herself to wait on trade at first. Afterward she plans to hire regular saleswomen — we'll be in school then, of course. We'll help out, though, any time she needs us."

"I should think it would be a delightful business, working with pretty dresses all the time," Ruth said.

Molly sighed a little. "It will be, if only people come to buy them. Do *you* think mother's shop will go well in this town, Ruth?"

THE CHINESE PAGODA 35

“Why, of course I do,” Ruth answered cheerfully. “Every one’s always complaining about having to go up to the city for clothes. I think the Pleasant Hill ladies will be tickled to death to have a real city shop on Main Street.”

They had entered the house now and were climbing the stairs. At the upper landing they separated, and the sisters hurried to their mother’s room to find Mrs. Bronson just opening her eyes.

“Time to get up, lazybones!” Barbara bent to kiss her cheek.

Mrs. Bronson yawned and sat up. “What *have* you been doing, darlings? Your cheeks are like poppies.”

“Upsets, Mumsy mine — upsets in a pagoda!” Babs replied.

Her mother looked bewildered. “Are you speaking English? No, never mind. Scurry, chicks, and let’s see how fast we can dress. This is a great day in the Bronson family!”

CHAPTER III

A STRANGE STORY

The next few days were busy ones. "The Hope Chest," as Mrs. Bronson called her shop, opened its doors, and there were two exciting days when Barbara served tea to all comers, while pretty Molly paraded in new gowns with the poise of a professional model. The formal opening was a decided success, and when it was over, many of the visitors returned to buy.

It was too early to be optimistic, for summer was a dull season and no real rush of business could be hoped for until the autumn styles came in. But the beginning was promising, and Mrs. Bronson went about her work with a lightened heart.

As soon as the opening was over, she excused the girls from attendance at the shop. "Get lots of exercise and lots of rest while you can, darlings," she urged them. "School will be-

gin in less than two months now, and then there'll be plenty of hard work for you both. So make the most of these vacation days."

This they proceeded to do. Or rather, as Babs laughingly put it, she got the exercise while Molly got the rest. Molly's idea of making the most of her vacation was to bring home an armload of books from the public library and to lie most of the afternoon in the old barrel-stave hammock at the side of the house.

Barbara, on the other hand, was out and away, exploring the town and getting acquainted. On her first free afternoon Ruth had taken her over to the high school, where the swimming-pool and tennis courts attracted all the young people of the town.

It was a little disappointing to find that most of the younger girls were away at camp or summer cottage. Pleasant Hill was very warm in summer, and every one who could sought cooler vacation spots. But the few girls she met welcomed her cordially, and she was beginning to feel very much at home.

Sometimes, for a change, the three girls accompanied Dr. Curtis on his country rounds. Although his town practice had fallen off of

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late years, the farm people were loyal to "the old Doctor," and it was no uncommon thing for him to drive his battered Ford twenty miles to attend a sick child or an injured farm-hand. Often he brought home his fee in the form of new-laid eggs, garden vegetables, or tree-ripened fruit. Babs, especially, enjoyed these excursions into what was for her a new world, and a fast friendship grew up between her and Ruth's Granther.

It was a blazing hot afternoon in the second week after the Bronsons' arrival. The three girls had all been over for their swim in the early morning, and Barbara and Ruth, having reluctantly decided that tennis in such a sun would be sheer insanity, came out to join Molly where she swayed lazily in her hammock.

"I trust you've brought a cold drink with you," was her greeting. "I'm perishing with thirst, and too hot to do a thing about it."

"Well, if you think we've got nothing better to do —" Babs began indignantly, but Ruth hushed her.

"Iced drinks are no good in this weather, anyway; they just make you thirstier. I thought we'd go down to the pagoda and make

some hot tea — I've a little alcohol stove there, and my Chinese tea-set."

"Hot tea — oh, Ruth!" Molly groaned. "How can you even think of it?"

Ruth smiled. "That shows you've never lived in the tropics. All the white people drink hot tea there — that is, the wise ones. Haven't you noticed it in Kipling's stories about India? He describes the heat till you can just feel it, and then he always mentions that a servant brought in tea. I've tried it myself, and, believe it or not, it's a lot more cooling than cold drinks."

"Well, I'll take a chance." Molly scattered her pillows and stood up. "I can't be any hotter, that's sure."

It was very dim in the little pagoda, and Ruth opened one shutter just wide enough to give them light. "We'll feel cooler if we don't see the sun," she remarked.

The Bronson sisters dropped upon the chest and watched with interest while Ruth brought out the red lacquer table. She sat cross-legged on the floor with the low table across her knees. Then she lighted the alcohol lamp under the small copper kettle and began carefully meas-

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uring tea into a quaint black pot covered with white plum blossoms.

Babs stared down into the tiny saucerless, handleless cup that Ruth presently passed to her.

“Did you say this was *tea*? Why, it isn’t even any color!”

“Oh, yes, it is, the palest possible gold color,” Ruth replied, smiling. “It’s real China tea, the Imperial Pekoe, made from buds and flowers and only the very youngest leaves. Most Americans would call it insipid; they like strong, bitter stuff. But this is the royal drink, exactly as it used to be made for the Empress Dowager herself. No, you don’t get cream and sugar; that would ruin it. Really, girls, it’s good. Try it, anyway, and then if you don’t like it, I’ll go to the house and make lemonade.”

Molly was the first to sip, deliberately. Then her face brightened. “Why, it’s delicious! It tastes like nothing on earth — certainly not a bit like any tea I’ve ever tried. Taste it, Babs; it’s great!”

“No fooling?” Babs wrinkled her sun-burned nose and stuck a cautious tongue into

her cup. Then she, too, smiled. "Um-m-m, it's marvelous! I guess the Empress Dowager knew what was what, after all. Who was she, anyway, Ruth? And how do we happen to be drinking her tea?"

"Oh, it wasn't sacred to the Empress," Ruth replied. "It's very popular with the wealthy Chinese in this country. Wang gets it from a friend in San Francisco. And you surely know who Tzu Hsi was, Babs. She was the last real ruler of the Empire, before China overthrew the Manchus."

"And you think I'd surely know that?" Barbara asked. "I'm overwhelmed at the compliment, but you might as well find out now as later that I never heard of the lady in my life. Mercy, I can't even remember whether Zachary Taylor came before Andrew Johnson or after Rutherford B. Hayes! How do you happen to be so up on Chinese royalty?"

"Well, you see," Ruth answered, settling herself more comfortably on the floor with her legs tucked up under her, "I was born in China."

Barbara stared at her. "How perfectly crazy! Why, you're as American as we are!"

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“ Crazy yourself, Babs,” Molly interrupted. “ She didn’t say she was Chinese.”

“ Well, she said she was born there, didn’t she? And you’re what you’re born, aren’t you? How else did we get to be American, I’d like to know? ”

Molly stretched out a languid white hand and, with unexpected firmness, clamped it over her sister’s mouth.

“ Go on, Ruthie; tell us all about it. I’d have demanded the story of your life long ago if I’d had any notion it had such a romantic beginning. Or are you fooling us? ”

Ruth gave a little sigh. “ It must be wonderful to have a sister! At first those squabbles of yours puzzled me; I really thought every minute there’d be a fight! But now — well, it’s just your way of having fun, isn’t it? ”

“ Never you mind, Ruth,” Barbara pushed her sister’s hand away. “ We’ll both squabble with you, and that way you can have twice as much fun as we do. There, is that a generous offer or is it not? But do get on with the story if there is one. Or *are* you just fooling? ”

“ No, it’s so,” Ruth answered seriously. “ I *was* born in China, really. You see, my father

— he was Granther's son, of course — was a doctor, too, a medical missionary. And so was mother. They knew each other in college, and they were married and went out to China just as soon as they got their degrees. They founded a hospital in Chungking and were — oh, awfully famous out there. The Manchu government was in power when they first went; there was a revolution shortly after, but my parents went on with their work just the same. Both governments appreciated what they were doing for the poor peasants, and helped them in every way.

“ One of the best friends they made was the mandarin Chu Hi, whose estates were near Chungking. He was very powerful at the Imperial Court, although he was a Chinese, not a Manchu. His family for hundreds of years had been the hereditary Keepers of the Wall — you can imagine what that meant! ”

“ I can't, if you mean me,” Babs remarked candidly. “ No, please don't explain it now! I'm sure it's one of those things I *ought* to know. Some day when it's not so hot, I'd just love to hear all about the mandarin, What-you-may-call-him. But somehow — it must be the heat!

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— he makes my head swim. Can't you take a short cut and get to *you*? ”

“ All right, then,” Ruth answered good-naturedly. “ I was born — yes, really! There, I beat you to it that time! And I lived in the hospital, an example to the Chinese mothers of what a properly-brought-up baby should be like. I understand I was really one of the star attractions of the place.

“ Well, and then, when I was a year old — ” her laughing voice dropped suddenly to a deeper note — “ a terrible epidemic of cholera broke out. It had been a bad year; there'd been flood and famine already, and the poor people died like flies. The hospital was swamped, and my parents worked night and day without sleep or rest.”

“ How terrible! ” Molly breathed. “ Where were you while all this was going on? ”

“ In the mandarin's palace. Chu Hi's entire family had been among the first victims of the disease, and he was a lonely, broken-hearted man. He gave my parents large sums of money to help in their fight, and he promised them to do what he could to keep their baby safe. The sickness never touched me.”

She hesitated for a minute, and the girls noticed that her eyes had filled with tears. "Your parents —" Molly prompted fearfully.

Ruth nodded. "Yes. It — it got them. Not till the very end, when they'd saved hundreds of lives. They died on the same night and were buried together in Chungking."

In spite of her gallant efforts, she finished her story with a sob. Molly reached out an impulsive hand. "We're so sorry, Ruthie dear — so awfully sorry! We didn't mean —" She broke off abruptly, for a shadow had fallen across the open door.

Wang stood there, his keen black eyes sweeping from Ruth's face, marred by tears, to those of the other girls. The imaginative Molly fancied that she read accusation in that swift glance, but when he spoke, his voice was expressionless, as usual.

"Little Flower!" It was his name for Ruth. "The honorable ancestor concludes his writings."

"All right, Wang, tell him I'm coming." Ruth rose quickly, and the Chinese, with a deep bow, glided off across the grass.

"Granthier's been writing some letters and

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wants me to take them down to catch the last mail," she explained. "It's cooler now; maybe you girls would like to walk down with me before supper?"

"That's a good scheme. We can stop at The Hope Chest and bring Mumsy home with us," Babs agreed. "But you didn't finish your story, Ruth," she continued, as they hurried toward the house. "How did you get home from China all that way by yourself?"

"Oh, Chu Hi sent me; he was awfully kind. I was in Wang's care, and Granther says he was the perfect nurse. I was only a year old, you know, so of course I don't remember anything about it."

"And he's been here ever since — Wang, I mean? I thought our Government didn't let Chinamen come to America to live."

"They don't, usually. But Chu Hi had influential friends at Washington; I suppose he arranged it. I've never asked. All I know is that Wang was told to look after me, and he's been doing it ever since."

"Ruth," Molly asked suddenly, "do you like Wang?"

"Like him?" Ruth stopped still and stared

at her. "Next to Granther, there's no one in the world I'm so fond of. Why do you ask that?"

"Oh, I don't know," Molly answered uncomfortably. "I just — wondered."

"I can tell you, Ruth," Babs volunteered, with a mischievous grin at her sister. "Molly's been reading a lot of thrillers lately; shocking literary taste, if you ask me. And they were all heavy on the Yellow Peril — smooth, smiling Chinese arch-villains who were plotting to overthrow the white race. You know the kind? So, the very minute my precious sister caught sight of Wang, she decided that here was something pretty sinister."

Ruth smiled, but her eyes were grave. "I know the kind of books you mean, and I hate them!" she exclaimed vehemently. "Stirring up trouble between nations that have always been friendly and giving people ridiculous notions — it oughtn't to be allowed!" She laughed apologetically. "Sorry, Molly, if I'm mean to your pet authors. But it does make me so furious! Why do they always have to pick on the Chinese for their villains?"

"Well, you've got to get a villain from some-

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where," Molly answered reasonably. "And the Chinese make grand ones because they're such mysterious people you can believe almost anything about them. At least, I always could before." She sighed resignedly. "I'm afraid I won't be able to keep on if Wang turns out to be a perfectly ordinary cook and maid-of-all-work. He *looks* sinister, anyway, Ruth; you must admit that."

"Well, he isn't," Ruth answered stoutly. "And I don't believe that, when you know him better, you'll call him 'ordinary,' either. He's been nurse and teacher and playmate and — oh, just everything to me, bless his heart. Sorry, Molly, but if you're looking for a villain, you'll have to find somebody besides my old Wang."

"Oh, well, that's all right, too," Molly replied cheerfully. "Now that I think it over, I believe I'll be happier with my villains between the covers of the books, where they belong."

CHAPTER IV

THE TATTOOED SAILOR

A cool breeze sprang up with the sunset. Ruth's flowers, which had drooped all day in the blazing sun, lifted their heads gratefully as she went among them with her watering-pot. Barbara and Molly helped her, and it was almost dark when they had finished.

As they approached the kitchen door, they were surprised to see a strange figure coming around the corner of the house.

He was a man of perhaps fifty, dressed in rough blue serge and walking with the rolling gait of a sailor. His seamed face was tanned to a deep mahogany, and the very light gray eyes looked strangely out of place in it.

Because of the heat, he was carrying his coat under his arm, and his shirt-sleeves were rolled to the elbows. The first thing the girls noticed was that his forearms were heavily tat-

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tooed. On each arm a blue and green dragon twined, its hideous head downward, the open jaws coming well down on the back of the hand. Red rays, evidently meant to imitate the fiery breath, shot outward, and with the slightest movements of his hands the two dragons seemed to move and breathe.

Instinctively Molly and Babs dropped back a pace, but Ruth stepped forward. "Good evening. Did you want to see the doctor?" she asked politely.

For a moment the man did not answer, and the odd pale eyes seemed to be appraising her from head to foot. He took no notice of the girls behind her.

Then, with an awkward gesture, he removed his cap.

"Evenin', miss." His voice was hoarse, and his smile, showing broken and blackened teeth, was not attractive. "Could you tell me, now, if I'm right for Dr. Fleming Curtis' place? This is his house, ain't it?"

"Yes, Dr. Curtis lives here," Ruth answered. "Have you a message for him? I'm his granddaughter."

"I thought so." He nodded sagely. "Aye,

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so you're the babby, eh? You wouldn't remember me, I reckon. Old Sailor Jim? You seen me afore, missy. You wouldn't be rememberin', though. Not likely."

"I'm sorry; I don't. Shall I call Grandfather?"

He shook his head. "It ain't him I'm wantin' to see. You got a Chineese here by the name of Wang, ain't you, miss? If you'd just tell him that Sailor Jim wants a few words —"

The screened door behind him opened silently. "Wang is here. Greetings O Jim."

The sailor wheeled about. "Well, you old heathen, if you ain't a sight for sore eyes! How're you, anyhow?"

"The days of this unworthy one are days of peace," Wang answered tranquilly. "There is news, O Jim?"

"And plenty!" the sailor answered emphatically. He turned to look suspiciously at the three girls, who still lingered in the path.

"Have you got some place where we can talk private-like?" he asked Wang. "There's a lot to tell, and none too much time. I got a week's shore-leave while the old *John J. Porter* is loadin' cargo at Frisco. But it's a long

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ways back, and I'm figgerin' on the mornin' train."

Wang held the screened door open. "A room in this dwelling is graciously set aside for this humble one. He will be honored if you will enter."

The girls stared blankly at the closing door.

"Well, who's your friend, Ruthie?" Babs demanded. "Gracious, he looks like something out of a pirate film!"

"Long John Silver — I thought of him right away!" Molly agreed excitedly. "Except that he had a peg-leg —"

"And a parrot," Babs added. "I rather thought of Captain Hook, myself, or — who was that terrible creature who chewed glass to show how tough he was? Blackbeard? I never can keep my pirates straight. Why didn't you tell us you had friends among them, Ruthie?"

Ruth shook her head, laughing. "It was a complete surprise to me. You heard him say I couldn't be expected to remember him, and I'm sure I don't. Anyway, he's Wang's friend, not mine. Shall we go down to the pagoda for upsets? It's almost bedtime."



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Ruth lighted the swinging oil lamp and put a military march record on the little phonograph. The three girls went briskly through their exercises and then dropped upon the teak-wood chest for a good-night chat.

A pale new moon swung across the sky of purple-blue, and all Ruth's garden flowers united to send up their sleepy fragrance. A little breeze fluttered the old apple tree and caressed the girls' exercise-flushed cheeks.

The night was very quiet. The house was dark, for Mrs. Bronson and the old Doctor were enjoying the evening freshness on the front veranda. Only in the little room off the kitchen where Wang slept was there a glimmer of light and the oddly pitched murmur of voices.

Molly glanced curiously across the lawn. "Am I imagining it, or are Wang and his pirate friend singing? Because, if they are, I think some one ought to tactfully mention to them that their harmony's all wrong."

Ruth listened a minute, then smiled. "They're talking Chinese. It does sound rather like vocal exercises, but that's part of it, you know. The inflection decides the sense of

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the word. If you say 'mow,' for instance, it's only your tone that shows whether you mean 'hat' or 'cat.' They're both 'mow.' "

"Well, they certainly go out of their way to make trouble for themselves, don't they?" Babs remarked respectfully. "I suppose you speak Chinese like a native, Ruth? Of course, you *are* a native; I keep forgetting that."

"I'm sorry to say I don't. Just a few words and common phrases that I've picked up from Wang. I can read fairly well, though. You don't have to know Chinese to read it, you see. You can read it in English."

"That doesn't make sense," Babs said frankly. "*How* can you? Why, they don't even use our alphabet! Explain, please."

"Well, it's like this." Ruth settled herself more comfortably. "You see those Chinese writings over there on the wall? They're quotations from Confucius — proverbs Wang thought were suitable for a little girl's playhouse. The first one says, 'The spilling of milk is not remedied by the spilling of tears.' That's familiar, isn't it? But I'll bet you never knew it came from Confucius in the first place."

"Well, if it did, Poor Richard was not so

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original as I've been taught to believe," Barbara laughed. "But go on, Ruthie. What about this reading in English?"

"I'm trying to explain. Those funny little characters don't represent sounds as our letters and words do. They represent ideas. And ideas are the same in any language. See if I can show you." She went over to the painted wall and scanned it closely. Molly and Babs followed her.

"Some of these are pretty complicated; I'm looking for a simple one. Here." She laid her hand on one of the characters. "This one here that looks like a window — he's the sun.

SUN



DAWN



PEACE



Yes, I know the sun doesn't look like a window, Babs. It used to be a circle with a dot inside in the ancient Chinese, but when they invented wooden type for printing, they found it was easier to make everything with square corners. Well, anyway, this is the sun. Now look over in the corner. Do you see the sun again, with a line under him? The line is the horizon. Sun

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coming over the horizon — you can guess what that word is? ”

“ Dawn? ” Molly ventured.

“ That’s it! And you don’t have to know the Chinese word for sun or horizon or dawn — you read the idea, in any language you know. You could do it in French or — or Hottentot, if you wanted to.”

“ Sounds entirely too simple,” Babs put in suspiciously. “ I’ll bet there’s more to it than that. What’s this squiggly thing here? It’s not a picture of any idea to me.”

Ruth peered in the direction of her finger. “ The light’s so bad — we’ll go into this more thoroughly in the daytime if you’re really interested. Oh, that? It means peace. A woman under a roof.”

“ A woman! I see the roof, but that other thing — ”

“ It is a woman, though. See her arms and legs? Of course it’s conventionalized — nobody’d ever get his letter written if he had to stop and draw a portrait every time. You just have to agree that it is a woman and read it that way wherever you find it.”

“ I knew there was a catch in it,” Babs sniffed.

“It’s interesting, though. And what a blessing it must be to the poor little Chinese who’re born bad spellers. I suppose they never even find it out!”

“You know a lot, Ruth,” Molly said admiringly. “Did Wang teach you?”

“He tried to, but I’m afraid I wasn’t a very good pupil. Wang is a very learned scholar, and I know he was anxious to give me a real Chinese education. He got a lot of books for me, easy ones — like primers, I guess — and we used to do lessons out here every day. But I was so impatient; none of the other girls stayed in on nice days, studying the Chinese classics, and I didn’t see why I should. So, as I got older, Wang just gave me up.”

“Oh, that’s too bad! Was he disappointed?”

“Yes, I’m sure he was. He never said much, though. He went on telling me fairy tales and legends and quoting moral maxims — I guess maybe he hoped a little of it would soak in, even if I wouldn’t study. I’ve always meant to take it up again sometime to please him, but I never seem to get around to it.”

“I don’t see that it would be of much use to you,” Barbara said. “As far as that goes,

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I don't see of what use it was to Wang. After all, he's just a cook, and you don't need much of an education in any language for that."

"Oh, but you don't understand," Ruth answered earnestly. "Wang isn't just a cook. He's a scholar, a teacher. He was tutor to the mandarin's children — the ones who died, you know, in the cholera epidemic. He holds any number of degrees from some native university."

"Well, but he *is* a cook," Barbara persisted. "If it isn't his trade, why does he stay here and do it?"

"I don't know, and Granther doesn't. You said the other day, Molly, that the Chinese are mysterious people. I think Wang proves it. Do you know that he won't even take any wages from us? He seems to be supplied with money; enough, that is, for his needs, which aren't many. Every year on my birthday he gives me a present; always something simple and inexpensive, but lovely. My tea-set, my blue pyjamas, the embroidered dresser-scarf in my room — they were all presents from Wang. But he'll take from us nothing but shelter and the food he eats, and he pays for that by doing the house-

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work. And here's another thing. He considers that he is still working for the mandarin. Do you notice that he never calls Granther 'master?' Granther is 'the illustrious ancestor,' but Chu Hi is still 'the master.' "

"But how funny!" Molly exclaimed. "What do you suppose the idea is?"

"We've never found out. When Wang turned up here with me in his arms, he told Granther that it was 'the master's' pleasure that he should remain and serve us until Chu Hi gave him different orders. That was fifteen years ago, and he's never told us anything more. It's no use asking Wang questions, and I've long since given it up."

"I think it's perfectly thrilling!" Molly protested. "A real mystery right in your own house! Aren't you wild to find out what it's all about?"

Ruth shook her head. "It's Wang's own business, you know. Of course I can't help wondering sometimes. That man who came to-night, now. I don't know who he could be! Wang never has guests. There are a few Chinese in town; some laundrymen and the men who run the chop suey restaurant. Sometimes

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Wang goes to the restaurant after closing time; they have a sort of club, I think. But none of them ever come here. I can't remember any one's ever coming to see him before."

"Well, it's all very mysterious!" Molly repeated, patting back a yawn. "How about bed, girls? I'm asleep on my feet."

The long hot day had indeed made Molly drowsy, and she fell asleep almost as soon as she was in bed. But late that night she awakened to find that a sudden chill had invaded the summer air.

Sleepily she stumbled to her feet to seek a blanket from the closet. Barbara roused as she did so, and sat up in bed.

"What *are* you doing, Sis? Br-r-r, it's cold! It can't be morning yet, can it?"

"No, I'm just getting a blanket. Here's one for you, too. Honey, didn't we put out the light in the pagoda before we came in?"

"Yes, of course; Ruth did. The very last thing before she locked the door. Why?"

"Well, it's burning now. Look. The door and the shutters are closed, but you can see light through the cracks."

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“How funny! I was sure Ruth put it out. Ought we to go down and see about it?”

Molly hesitated, then jumped into bed. “It can’t do any harm; it’ll just burn itself out. And I’m frozen stiff, just walking across the room. Go back to sleep, kitten; I’m going to.”

She wakened again, hours later. The room was ghostly with the light of early dawn, and somewhere in the house there was a murmur of voices.

She strained her ears and decided that the sounds came from Dr. Curtis’ room farther along the corridor. Men’s voices, they sounded like, very low, more a rumbling vibration than a sound. And they went on and on.

Springing softly to her feet, Molly opened her bedroom door. The voices were louder now, though still indistinct, and she was almost sure that she could distinguish Ruth’s soft treble, mingled with the deeper tones. She was right; they were coming from the Doctor’s room.

Some early patient, perhaps? That was odd. But, after all, it was none of her business. She turned back to bed, and, as she did so, she

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glanced out of the window. No light burned in the little pagoda now, but the first slanting rays of the sun touched its gay green roof.

Molly leaned out to see the slender rim of the rising sun above the treetops. It made her think of something. “Sun over the horizon — dawn!” she murmured sleepily, and went back to bed and to an enchanting dream of herself as a princess of old Cathay.

CHAPTER V

GONE!

Molly and Barbara both overslept, and when they went down to breakfast, they found that their mother had already left for The Hope Chest.

They caught a glimpse of Dr. Curtis reading the paper on the veranda as they passed the open front door. Their places were laid at the table, but there was no sign of Ruth or Wang.

A little wonderingly they began on the halves of golden cantaloupe which waited for them. They had almost finished when Ruth pushed open the swing door from the kitchen. She was carrying a tray with cocoa and cereal, and in the first glance the girls noted that her eyes were red.

Her pleasant smile was missing as she briefly answered their greetings. She served them and slid into her own place, making a pretense

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of eating her cereal. But Babs, watching her shyly, was horrified to see a silent tear splash into her lap.

“Ruthie, honey, what *is* the matter?” she asked impulsively. “Something’s gone wrong — do tell us. Maybe we can help.”

Ruth dabbed her eyes without further attempt at concealment. “Thanks, Babs, but you can’t help. Nobody can. Wang — Wang has gone!”

“Gone? Gone where?”

“Back to China. His master, Chu Hi, is dying, and he sent for him.” With an effort Ruth pulled herself together and managed a wan smile. “I’m sorry to act like this. But Wang was awfully dear to me, and I’m going to miss him so.”

“Of course you are,” Molly said warmly. “But, if his master needs him, you wouldn’t want to keep him here. Perhaps he’ll come back — afterwards.”

“I’m afraid not,” Ruth answered forlornly. “I don’t know whether I told you; after the cholera swept his family away, Chu Hi retired to a Buddhist monastery. He gave his fortune to the poor and became a monk. And — and

Wang thinks it will be his duty to take the vows, too, so that he can stay and look after his master till he dies. No one not a monk is allowed to live in the monastery for any length of time, you know. And they never do come out again! I just know Wang doesn't want to be a monk, either!"

"Well, he didn't have to go, did he?" Babs asked practically. "Chu Hi couldn't make him. He must have wanted to."

"Oh, he did," Ruth agreed wearily. "Wang was fond of Granther and me, I know. But we're nothing at all beside Chu Hi. He simply couldn't wait to get away; he caught the early morning train with that sailor who brought the news."

"Was that what he came for?" Babs asked.

"Yes. He's a seaman on a freighter trading between San Francisco and Hongkong, and an old acquaintance of Wang's. He was on the ship when Wang brought me over; that's what he meant by saying he'd seen me before. He used to work for the mandarin when he was a young man, and I suppose that's why Chu Hi picked him out as a messenger. Somehow, I just *felt* that he was bringing us trouble!"

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“ When did all this happen, anyway? ” Molly asked.

“ This morning about daybreak — at least, that’s the first I heard of it. Wang knocked at my door and asked me to come to Granther’s room. He said he had something to say to us both that couldn’t wait. Sailor Jim was waiting for him out by the gate. They caught the early train for the west coast.”

“ What did Wang say? ”

“ Oh, just what I’ve told you — that his master was in failing health and had sent for him. He thanked us for our kindness to him, and we thanked him for all he’d done for us, and — well, that was all there was to it. The last I saw of Wang, he was trudging off to the station with that sailor. And I’ll never see him again! ”

Molly’s soft hand stole into Ruth’s. “ It’s too bad, dear, and we know just how you feel. But you mustn’t mind so much. You wouldn’t want him to stay when he wanted to go.”

“ No, of course not. It isn’t his going I mind so much, really. It’s — oh, I can’t explain! ”

“ You mean you’ll miss his help around the house? ” Barbara inquired.

“ Oh, *no!* I don’t mind the work a bit. I’m really quite a good cook; Wang said so himself. And you girls and your mother aren’t a bit of trouble. No, I hadn’t even thought about the work.”

“ We’ll help, you know,” Barbara offered. “ We can take all the care of our rooms and help with the dishes and the cooking, though I’m afraid we’re not terribly good at that. This is just like our own home to us, anyway, and we might as well be useful.”

“ Bless you, Babs,” Ruth answered gratefully. “ I know you mean it, too, though really there’s no need — oh, I *am* glad it was you Judge Doyle sent us, instead of some sniffy old-lady boarders! ”

“ So’re we glad.” It was Molly’s gentle voice. “ But, Ruth, are you going to tell us? You needn’t unless you want to, you know.”

“ Tell you what? ” Ruth looked startled.

“ Whatever it is that’s worrying you. You’re not just grieving because Wang is gone. No, wait. It’s your own business, and we won’t ask a single question if you’d rather we wouldn’t. But I just thought — well, if we could help at all, Babs and I, we want to.”

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“What are you talking about, Sis?” Barbara demanded. “I just told Ruthie we’d help with the housework. Didn’t you hear me?”

“It’s more than the housework, I think,” Molly answered softly. “*Can* we help, Ruth? Or shall we mind our own business?”

The quick tears had started to Ruth’s eyes again, but she dashed them away.

“Thanks a lot, Molly,” she said soberly. “There *is* — something, but no one can do anything about it. It’s too late now. I’m the one to blame, and I’ll have to take my medicine.”

She rose and began to clear the breakfast table. But warm-hearted little Babs stopped her by clutching her about the waist.

“Oh, Ruthie, don’t *be* like that!” she begged. “My goodness, what’s the use of having friends if you can’t unload your troubles on them? What *is* all this, anyway?”

“Hush, dear, Ruth doesn’t —” Molly began, but Ruth stopped her.

“Yes, I do! It’s no use, and it can’t do any good, but maybe I’ll feel a little better. Wait!”

She stacked the dishes hastily on the tray, and tossed aside her apron.

“Will you both come down to the pagoda?”

I think it'll be easier there — if you're sure you don't mind — ”

“ Don't be silly! ” Barbara's arm was around her waist, and Molly was close on her other side.

“ We'll do the dishes when we come back, ” Babs went on. “ And do cheer up, Ruthie. It can't be as bad as all that. And, anyway, remember that ‘ the spilling of milk is not remedied by the spilling of tears. ’ ”

Ruth managed a watery smile, but she did not speak until the three girls entered the pagoda and took their usual places in the window seat.

CHAPTER VI

THE KEEPERS OF THE WALL

“ I told you,” Ruth began, with an effort at speaking calmly, “ that Wang wanted to educate me in the Chinese classics? And that he gave it up because I didn’t show much interest? Well, he’s never referred to it since, and I didn’t think he cared much. But this morning, when he told us good-by, he told us — something else.”

“ Well? ” Babs prodded as Ruth paused. “ Go on, Ruth. Told you what? ”

“ It seems it wasn’t Wang’s idea; it was Chu Hi’s,” Ruth proceeded. “ And now Wang has to go back to him and tell him that he failed. He feels terribly about it, and it’s all my fault.”

“ Did Wang say that? ” Molly asked. “ Somehow I can’t imagine his scolding you.”

“ He didn’t scold; he just blamed himself. He feels that he failed as a teacher. Don’t you

see? That's what makes me so ashamed. For it wasn't his fault; it was mine. Oh, I'll never forgive myself, never!"

For a moment the two sisters looked at her helplessly. There was no consolation that they could think of. Then Molly attempted to divert her thoughts.

"What was Chu Hi's idea, anyway? Why was he so anxious to have you know about his country?"

"He lost his own children in the epidemic — I told you that," Ruth answered slowly. "There was no son to come after him and be the Keeper of the Wall when he died. And I think — he was my father's friend, you know. He seems to think that *I* could take his son's place. At least, that is what Wang told us this morning. He never said anything about it before."

The Bronson sisters looked completely bewildered.

"You said something about Wang's master's being the Keeper of the Wall the other day, but I didn't understand it very well," Molly ventured. "I supposed he was a soldier — you know, like Horatius keeping the bridge. I

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don't see what you could have to do with that."

"Is it the Great Wall of China that has to be kept?" Barbara asked uncertainly. "Because that sounds like a rather large order for one lone girl, if you ask me."

"It's hard to explain," Ruth answered. "The Chinese talk in parables, you know. But the Great Wall isn't a wall any more; it's a symbol."

"Oh, you're wrong there, Ruthie," Babs answered earnestly. "It's an honest-to-goodness wall, all right; I saw it in a news reel not long ago. It's made of brick, and it's so wide that six horsemen can ride abreast on it. And it's the only handiwork of man that would be visible from the moon—how's that for information? Oh, yes, and it would reach from New York to Kansas and half again as far if the kinks were all straightened out. So it's no use trying to tell me it's just an imaginary line like — like the equator."

Ruth smiled faintly. "I didn't say that. Of course the Great Wall is real. I know a lot of facts about it, too. It was built in the fourth or fifth century, B.C., but was repaired and strengthened in the thirteenth century, A.D.,

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to keep out the Tartars. Chu Hi's ancestor fought a glorious battle up and down forty miles of it and turned back the invaders so effectually that they didn't come again in his lifetime. And, because of that, the Emperor made him and his descendants Keepers of the Wall forever."

"The Tartars did get in at last, though," Molly remarked. "And the Mongols and the Manchus — why, the Manchus conquered China and ruled it till our own time. Why didn't Chu Hi's ancestors do something about that?"

"They did," Ruth answered patiently. "They kept the Wall through all the changes that came. But, instead of the material Wall, they kept a spiritual one. That's what I meant when I said the Wall had become a symbol."

"Would you mind putting that in plain English?" Babs asked politely. "Me, I'm away out over my head already."

"I'll try." The sisters were pleased to see that, in the interest of the discussion, Ruth had forgotten her recent distress. "Did you ever stop to think," she went on, "that China is the only country we studied in ancient history that's still here? Its records go back five thousand

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years, and it was a civilized nation then. When Babylon and Egypt were great nations — well, China was, too. But they're gone, and China is still a great nation. Then Greece and Rome came along, had their day, and were gone. China was old when they were young, and China is here yet. No other country in the world ever managed to do it."

"Why, how funny! I never thought of it before, but it's true!" Molly exclaimed. "When Greece was conquered by Rome, it was just blotted out as a country. And the same thing happened when the barbarians conquered Rome. But China has been conquered lots of times —"

"And she's still China!" Ruth finished triumphantly. "That's what I mean. It doesn't matter what happens from the outside. China protects herself behind a Wall; an invisible one that no one can see, but that's so strong nothing can break it down. When the Romans conquered a country, they made Romans of the inhabitants. But when the Tartars and then the Manchus conquered China, *they* became Chinese. That's what the Wall does."

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Barbara stirred restlessly. "Seems to me this conversation's getting dangerously instructive. After all, it's supposed to be summer vacation, isn't it? If you could just tell us in a few simple words what this mysterious invisible Wall is, maybe then we could go back to topics more suited to my feeble intellect."

"I'm sorry," Ruth replied. "I didn't mean to deliver a lecture; honestly I didn't. But I'm just trying to explain — you see, honey, the Wall stands for learning. They think — now, mind you, we may not agree at all, but they'd say that just proves our ignorance — they firmly believe that all the wisdom in the world is contained in the Chinese classics and that, as long as they treasure this knowledge and hand it down, no outside 'barbarians' can injure them, no matter what they do. And you'll have to admit that it seems to have worked pretty well up to now."

"Then Wang's Chu Hi isn't a soldier?" Molly asked. "His way of keeping the Wall is by knowing so much and passing it on? Is that it?"

"That's it. The first Chu Hi was a soldier, of course, and many of the earlier descendants.

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But, as the Chinese came to rely on knowledge rather than force, the family kept its position by excelling in learning. Wang's Chu Hi is such a profound scholar that he was respected and feared at the court of the Empress Dowager, although she was a Manchu. If he hadn't given up the world and became a monk, he'd still be an important man under the new government. That's why they call learning 'the Wall which cannot be broken while the Keepers are faithful.' And — " suddenly Ruth's face fell — " that's why I've done such a dreadful thing. I was to have been a Keeper, and I have failed! "

" But why *you*, Ruth? " Molly asked. " I still can't see the point. You're an American. What good would it do to make you a Keeper? "

" I don't know. Wang didn't explain, and I hadn't the heart to ask him. Oh, if he'd only told me before! That was why he came, why he stayed with us all these years. He wanted to teach me, and I didn't understand. "

" Well, why didn't he *tell* you? " inquired Barbara. " Why didn't he insist on your studying if there was such a good reason for it? "

" Because it had to be of my own free will — I had to want wisdom for its own sake. Don't

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you see? Wang was to offer it to me, and, if I really were the sort of person who was worthy to be a 'Keeper,' I'd take it. And — well, I wasn't, and I didn't. That's the whole story."

"Well, I think that's a crazy notion!" Babs said indignantly. "I wouldn't know long division to this day if Miss Gray had been like that. She kept me in at recess and after school for a week, just laboring with me, and she didn't let me out till I knew the stuff. Nobody worried about whether I was worthy to learn long division or not. I learned it or else — !"

"Would you just as soon not bring that up, Babs?" Molly put in. "No one in the Bronson family has forgotten your battle with long division — I've always thought myself it had something to do with poor Miss Gray's nervous breakdown six years later. You never saw anything like it, Ruth. Mums tried to teach her, I tried it, and poor Miss Gray vowed she'd get it into her head if it took a lifetime. I still shudder when I recall what we all went through."

"Well, heaven knows *I'm* not anxious to recall it," Babs said hastily. "Anyway, I learned it, didn't I? And that proves — now

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you've made me go and forget what I was trying to prove, Sis! What was I talking about, Ruth?"

"I think the general idea was to try to cheer me up," Ruth answered, and the sisters were glad to notice that her smile was real. "You have, too, both of you. I'll always be sorry that I disappointed Chu Hi and Wang, but it can't be helped now. And thanks a lot for listening to my troubles — I never had any one to talk things out with before, and it does help."

"Now you're being sensible, Ruth," Molly applauded. "It's too bad it turned out the way it did, but there's no use in worrying over it now. Let's talk about something else."

"All right," Ruth agreed willingly. "Wang asked me to say good-by to you girls. He said that he went with a lighter heart because he was leaving me with such good friends."

"He did?" Molly asked, startled. "Why, I thought he didn't like us. He always looked at us so queerly —"

"Oh, that was just his way. At first, I suppose, he was making up his mind about you. But he really did like you both, and your mother, too. He was glad you came."

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“Now aren’t you ashamed, Sis?” Babs asked. “And all the time you were trying to make him out a villain.”

“Oh, I was not!” Molly answered warmly. “That was just at the very first — *you* know, Ruth, we talked about Chinese villains? You don’t think he guessed?”

“I’m sure he didn’t. He called you ‘the golden-hearted one’ and Babs ‘the small one who sees clearly.’ So you see he liked you both.”

“Good old Wang!” Barbara exclaimed. “We could easily have been nicer to him, too. Oh, mercy, now you’ve got *me* doing it!”

“Do you know what I’ve been thinking, Ruth?” Molly asked softly. “I don’t think your lessons were such a failure, after all. You may not have learned as much as Wang expected, but you do know a lot about China, more than any one else I know. I studied Asiatic history last year, and *I* didn’t find out the things you’ve told us — about the invisible Wall and all that. It seems to me you got the spirit, even if you missed some facts. You *understand* China. Why, what’s the matter?”

For Ruth was staring at her, her cheeks

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flushed with excitement. "Molly!" she exclaimed now. "Did — you've talked to Wang! Did he tell you?"

"What do you mean? I haven't seen Wang since his queer friend came last night. Why?"

"Oh! I thought he might have — it seemed so odd, your saying that."

"Saying what?"

"About — about my really having learned something. You see, just before he went, Wang said something like that. He said that he'd never had a girl pupil before and that he should have remembered women learn by instinct rather than reason. I don't know just how he put it, but that was what he meant. And — I don't understand this at all — he said very solemnly that all things are possible under heaven and that, if I sought it earnestly, my feet would yet find the path. It did sound sort of hopeful, don't you think?"

"Of course it did!" Molly exclaimed. "I don't see why you've done all this regretting and worrying if he said that! What else did he tell you?"

"That was all. He put his hands on my head and blessed me in Chinese and gave me his

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farewell letter. Then he said good-by to Granther and went away.”

“ Why a farewell letter? ” Babs asked curiously. “ He was *saying* farewell, wasn’t he? ”

“ Yes.. I don’t know why he wrote me a letter, too.”

Ruth put her hand into her pocket and drew out a tiny, tightly rolled cylinder of rice paper.

“ I was so upset I completely forgot it,” she confessed. “ Granther and I just glanced at it. It’s very flowery, and I don’t know exactly what it means. Maybe you can find some more consolation in it, Molly. You seem to be good at that.”

CHAPTER VII

THE CHINESE RIDDLE

“ Why, it’s in English! ”

Molly smoothed out the thin paper. The words were printed in India ink with a fine brush, and there was a Chinese look to the letters, but they were undoubtedly English ones.

“ Yes, Wang could write it, or, rather, print it, when he wanted to. I suppose he didn’t trust my Chinese to get the sense of it.”

Barbara had been rapidly scanning the note over her sister’s shoulder. “ Well, if you can get the sense of it *this* way, you’re brighter than I am. What does he mean, anyway, Ruth? Do you know? ”

“ I’m afraid I don’t, exactly. Read it out loud, Molly, and see what you think.”

Molly read aloud very slowly:

“ Wouldst thou find happiness?

“ The eye of the uninstructed seeth it in many

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places, but the learned person is not deceived. For where shall happiness lie, save between the bringers of brightness, below that which is highest, and above the one of all most miserable?

“ Yet shall it not be thine until thou hast thrust it from thee! ”

“ Well, he wants you to be happy,” Molly said doubtfully. “ And as nearly as I can make out, he’s telling you how. Is that the way it seems to you, Ruth? ”

“ Ye-es, I guess so. I didn’t think all that flowery part was meant to tell me anything in particular, though; I thought it was just general good wishes. ‘ For where shall happiness lie, save between the bringers of brightness, below that which is highest, and above the one of all most miserable? ’ That doesn’t *tell* me anything. It asks a question, doesn’t it? ”

“ But it’s a question with the answer in it,” Molly argued. “ He’s saying that happiness does lie between the bringers of brightness and all the rest of it, if that means anything to you. It certainly doesn’t to me.”

“ *I* think it sounds like a riddle,” Babs put in. “ Or some sort of Chinese joke. Was Wang fond of jokes, Ruth? ”

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“Mercy, no! He was the most solemn person I ever knew. You’re right, Babs; it does sound like a riddle. But why should Wang leave me a riddle to guess? He won’t even know if I find the answer.”

“Just what did he say when he gave it to you?” Molly asked thoughtfully.

“I told you. He’d been talking about woman’s instinct and how it was her way to knowledge. Only he didn’t say ‘knowledge’; he said ‘the pearls of heaven.’ That’s another name for it.”

“My goodness, and a little while ago you said another name for it was the Great Wall,” Babs giggled. “Pearls and walls! Far be it from me to criticize, Ruthie, but I got a D on a perfectly *perfect* theme once, just because I mixed metaphors.”

“Oh, well —” Ruth laughed, too. “When the whole Chinese language is practically made of metaphors, you can’t expect them not to get mixed once in a while. Anyway, I knew what Wang meant.”

“Well, we’re trying to figure out what he did mean,” Molly said patiently. “You’re always changing the subject, Babs; let’s stick to

Wang's riddle for a few minutes. He told you," she went on to Ruth, "that he should have remembered that a woman's instinct was her way to the 'pearls of heaven.' That's what you told us a little while ago, wasn't it? Then did he give you the paper? Right away, without saying anything more?"

"No, first he said what I told you — that all things are possible under heaven and that, if I sought it earnestly, my feet would find the path. *That's* when he gave me the paper, just as he said that. Then he blessed me and went away."

"Can't you write and ask him what he meant?" Babs asked suddenly.

Ruth shook her head. "I don't even know where the monastery is. No, if I don't figure it out myself, I'll never —"

"Ruth, listen!" Molly exclaimed excitedly. "I think I've *got* something! I believe this letter is a test!"

"A test? I'm afraid I don't understand, Molly."

"But it's so plain! Wang said that, if you sought it earnestly, your feet would find the path. He meant the path to knowledge, of

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course — that's what he'd been talking about. And he'd just been saying that your instinct might make up for the studying you didn't do. Well, don't you see? The riddle gives you another chance. *If* you use your instinct for all it's worth and *if* you do some earnest seeking, you can find the answer to the riddle. And if you can do that, it'll prove — ”

“ That I'm not a failure? ” Ruth's face brightened amazingly. “ Oh, Molly, you clever thing! But how *can* it be? Even working out the riddle wouldn't prove that I'd mastered all those volumes of classics Wang was so keen about.”

“ No, but it would show this,” Molly answered slowly. “ That you'd learned to understand the Chinese mind, to think as they think. Maybe that isn't all that Wang hoped for you, but it must be the most important thing. And, from what he said, I believe he thinks now it's enough.”

“ That was what my studies were for,” Ruth agreed instantly. “ To learn to understand — Wang said so. I see what you mean, Molly. Wang's riddle is an example of Chinese thinking; it would never make sense to any one who

didn't know their ways. But if it makes sense to *me*, then I *do* know, and Wang's efforts to teach me weren't wasted. Oh, but this is wonderful! All I have to do is work out the riddle — let me see it again!"

She took the little piece of paper and wrinkled her brows over it. And slowly, as she read and reread, the light died out of her face. Her lips quivered as she raised her eyes at last.

"Well, I'm afraid it isn't quite so wonderful, either," she said, with a gallant attempt at a smile. "It — it doesn't make a bit more sense than it did before."

"Of course it doesn't," Molly answered quickly. "Do you think Wang would make it so simple as all that? Don't you remember he warned you that it would take some earnest seeking? You haven't even begun, yet! This isn't a game, it's a serious test, remember."

Ruth threw her a grateful glance. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Molly! I was silly to think I could work it right off. Well —" she drew a long breath. "I don't know how useful my instinct will be, but I'm certainly going to be an earnest seeker. I disappointed Wang once, but I'll not do it again."

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He's given me this chance, and I'm going to make good if it takes me the rest of my life!"

"Good for you, Ruthie!" Babs had been a silent and puzzled listener up to now. "The old never-say-die spirit that made our gee-lorious nation what she is to-day! Don't give up the ship! Lafayette, we are here! Well, that last one doesn't seem to fit, exactly, but —"

Molly interrupted her firmly. "She means well, Ruth; but you'll have to learn to sit on her if you ever expect to get anywhere. Keep still, young'un. Have you any idea how you'll start, Ruth?"

Ruth slowly nodded. "Yes, I have. I'm going to take up my Chinese studies right where I left off years ago. The riddle may be a quotation I ought to know; maybe part of a poem. Of course it may not, but, anyway, if the idea is to learn to think in the Chinese way, the books will help me. Don't you think so, Molly?"

"Yes, that seems the best way to begin. You may come across something that will help right away. You still have the books Wang gave you?"

"They're here in the chest we're sitting on. I'll start studying to-morrow."

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Babs wriggled uneasily. "Studying — in this weather? Oh, Ruthie, do you *have* to do that?"

"It won't be studying — it'll be more like working out a puzzle, honey. I've seen you doing cross-words on hotter days than this. And I'll never have a minute's peace till I know what the riddle means."

"Oh — curiosity!" Barbara looked relieved. "Well, now you're getting down to my level. How'd you like to take a pupil? *I'm* curious, too."

"It's Ruth's riddle, remember," Molly warned her. "Wang didn't suggest that *we* should take a hand. It *would* be rather fun to study with you, though, Ruth. We wouldn't interfere with what you're trying to do, but I should like to know a little more about that fascinating writing — that is, if the books are easy enough."

"Oh, they are," Ruth answered eagerly. "I never got beyond what would be about the second grade with us — the classics retold for children, the same ones that are used in the Chinese schools. You girls could learn enough to read as well as I do, I know. And I'd love to have

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you if you wouldn't be bored. Would you really like to try?"

"Tell me this first," Babs said cautiously. "Is there any mathematics? Because that's where I draw the line."

"Not in my books," Ruth reassured her. "I guess I didn't get that far."

"That's grand. Spelling's out, thank goodness — you explained that. Let's see. Grammar? I'm not very fond of that."

"No grammar," Ruth answered gayly. "All the books are story-books, Babs, myths and legends, and history — not that I can always tell which is which. And poetry; some of it is really lovely. Then there is a lot of philosophy; the sayings of Confucius and that sort of thing. An educated Chinese is supposed to have a maxim on the tip of his tongue to fit any situation that can possibly come up."

"And I suppose that makes him the life of the party," Barbara said gloomily. "They smiled when I sat down at the piano, but they roared when I quoted Confucius! Oh, well, just so I know the worst!"

"You don't have to do it, dear. Some of it is awfully tiresome, and I'm not much of a

teacher. There's really no reason why you girls should bother."

"But we want to, Ruth," Molly insisted. "At least, *I* do. I was so interested in what you've told us. If I can learn half as much as you know, it'll be worth while. We'll excuse the youngster here — "

"You will not!" Babs cried indignantly. "I guess I need moral maxims on the tip of my tongue as much as anybody! I never know the right answer when a teacher gets sarcastic about my punctuation — probably Confucius will give me a really snappy comeback. I'm in this, Ruthie, so you might as well resign yourself."

"Well, we'll leave it this way." Ruth smiled at her two friends. "We'll all three start, an hour or two down here every afternoon. And neither of you needs to come any day when you've something better to do. Then if you find it's a nuisance and want to give it up, that'll be all right, too. Does that suit every one? "

"Suits me," Molly agreed. "But I don't think I'm going to find it a nuisance. Can we start this afternoon, Ruth? "

Ruth glanced at her wrist-watch. "Heav-

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ens, it's ten o'clock, and the breakfast dishes not touched! Yes, I think we can begin after lunch. But I must fly!"

"And we've been too upset for upsets this morning," Barbara observed. "We'll have to do a double dose to-night. Come on, Sis, let's straighten up our rooms while Ruth does the dishes. Then we start digging for the 'pearls of heaven' about one, Ruth? All right, Teacher. I'll be here with a big red apple!"

CHAPTER VIII

HUNS AND TARTARS

Ruth began by reviewing for herself, and teaching her two "pupils," the two hundred and fourteen radicals, or root signs, on which the written Chinese language is based.

Ruth explained that these pictures give the clue to the sense, while the phonetic signs used with them indicate the sound. They decided not to bother much with the phonetics, since to learn to speak the language without a teacher was clearly impossible. If they could just learn to read well enough to understand Wang's books, Ruth felt they would have accomplished all that they could hope for.

These books, thin paper-bound volumes stitched in bright red silk, fascinated the Bronson girls. They made many mistakes and encountered many difficulties, but they did begin

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to feel before long that they were making some progress.

On a rainy afternoon about a month after Wang's departure the three girls were busy in the pagoda. Summer rain drenched the outside world and pattered on the roof, but inside all was snug and cozy.

Molly suddenly looked up from the volume on her lap. "Do you know what this makes me think of?" she asked.

She was reading, or trying to read, a simplified version of the "Book of War," written by Chin two thousand years ago.

"It's exactly like Julius Caesar!" she went on. "You know, we had his 'Gallic Wars' in second-year Latin. This man has the very same way that Caesar had of assuming that of course his country was doing the barbarians a favor by conquering them."

"I've noticed that, too." Ruth raised her eyes. "The Chinese were like the Romans in a lot of ways. They were perfectly convinced that they were the only civilized nations and that it was a blessing to the rest of the world to be noticed by them — even if it meant a war! They both figured that it was terribly ungrate-

ful of any other country to object to being conquered by them."

"I wonder how they got that way?" Babs, ever willing to forego study for conversation, laid down her book. "The Chinese, I mean. I know how the Romans did. They really *were* more civilized than most of the tribes they fought with. They called the rest of the world barbarians because barbarians were about all they ever ran into."

"Well, it was the same way with the Chinese," Ruth answered. "Their first enemies, away back in the B.C.'s when they built the Wall, were the Huns, the same people the Romans had their troubles with."

"Why, I never knew that!" Molly exclaimed. "Are you sure, Ruth?"

Ruth nodded. "Not the very *same* Huns, of course. But they all came from Mongolia, north of China — hordes of wild horsemen, with nothing on their minds but fighting. Some of them went east into Europe, and others went south into China. They were called by different names, and of course there were lots of different tribes. But they all came from the same neighborhood, and they all had the same bad

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habits. They never built a city of their own, but they destroyed and burned and robbed wherever their wild horses carried them."

"Nice people!" Babs observed. "I remember reading about Genghiz Khan and Tamerlane — I suppose they were some of that lot?"

"Yes, but that was centuries later," Ruth answered. "They didn't change much in a thousand years, though. The Khans were Tartars, and they threw a terrible scare into Europe when they conquered Russia. They were in China at the same time, too — the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that was, if I've got the dates right. And later some of their cousins swooped down on India — they called them Moghuls there. They came awfully close to conquering the whole world once. It was really only because they fought among themselves that the Western nations were able to drive them out of Europe. Just suppose they hadn't! Where do you suppose we'd be?"

"It's not where; it's what," Babs answered cheerfully. "They'd have been bound to discover America sometime, even if they'd grabbed poor Isabella's jewels so she couldn't send Columbus over. They'd have settled down over

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Babs remarked. "I mean, now that they know Americans and English and French people. They don't think we're barbarians, do they?"

"Well, it's only lately that they've been willing to admit we're not," Ruth smiled. "And they still don't say that we know more than they do. They only agree that we have some new discoveries to add to what they always knew. They're sending students over here and welcoming Americans, like my parents, who come to teach them the new sciences. The idea is that they'll put our new knowledge on top of their old, and then they'll still know more than the rest of the world."

"Well, you have to admire them for not giving up," Babs laughed. "That's their story, and they stick to it."

She turned to survey the dripping trees. The rain was slackening now, and flying wisps of cloud revealed occasional patches of blue sky. Barbara cast her book from her with a yawn.

"I think I've done enough for to-day," she remarked. "Two solid weeks on the story of the Archer Lord and the Western Royal Mother, and very tame it turned out when I got to the end. That is, if I read it right. Fancy

having your wife turned to a frog! How about tea, Ruthie? Is there still some of the Empress Dowager's choicest?"

"Yes, but it's getting low." Ruth gathered up the books and brought out the little kettle. "I'm afraid we'll have to come down to common grocer's tea pretty soon. We'll never be able to get the royal kind without Wang."

"You haven't heard anything from him, have you?" Molly asked. "I thought your grandfather might at least have had a card saying he arrived safely."

"Not a word," Ruth answered. "It's been a month now since he left us, and it seems like a year."

"Ruth," Babs asked abruptly, "are you getting any nearer to the answer to the riddle? Have you found anything that helped in all this?" She swept her hand toward the pile of books.

"Not a thing, Babs," Ruth answered soberly. "I've tried so hard, too! I thought Wang's riddle might be a quotation from some poem and that, if I could find the place, it would tell me the rest of it. But I've gone right through the volume of Li Po, and there's nothing there."

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“ Oh, well, cheer up, honey,” Molly said consolingly. “ There’s another month before school begins and a lot of books you haven’t touched yet. There’s plenty of time to find it.”

“ Sometimes I think it takes more than time, girls,” Ruth answered. “ It takes more — well, brains — than I seem to have.”

“ Oh, don’t weaken! ” Babs admonished her. “ Remember that you were born in China. Didn’t you just tell us that the Chinese never admitted they hadn’t all the brains in the world? You’ll find it, all right. See if you don’t.”

“ Nice of you to say so, anyway,” Ruth answered gratefully. “ And I’m not weakening, Babs. I wouldn’t dare, with you two around — why, you’d never speak to me again if I gave up. Don’t pay any attention to anything I say. I may get discouraged sometimes, but I’m never, *never* going to quit till I know the answer! ”

CHAPTER IX

THE SAILOR'S RETURN

On the next morning the three girls, following their daily custom, went over to the high school for a swim. They met several friends and were late in returning.

“It’s lunch-time right now,” Ruth exclaimed, as she opened the front door. “I’m afraid it’ll be a hurry-up meal, girls — do you mind chipped beef and canned soup? There’s some cake from yesterday — oh!” She broke off, staring across the hall toward the dining-room.

The table, which she had left bare except for a centerpiece and bowl of flowers, was laid for four. And from behind the closed kitchen door came the clatter of pans.

“What in the world —” Ruth began.

“Maybe Wang has come back!” Molly exclaimed in the same breath.

“Oh, no, it *couldn’t* be!” But Ruth’s eyes

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were shining as she started impetuously toward the kitchen.

“Ruthie!” The old Doctor’s voice startled them. “Come here, dear; I have something to tell you. You, too, girls.”

Rather reluctantly they turned back and entered the Doctor’s study. He rose from his desk and closed the door behind them.

“Tell us, Granther,” Ruth begged. “Oh, I’m so excited! *Who* is in the kitchen? It couldn’t be Wang, could it?”

The light died out of her eyes as Dr. Curtis shook his head. “No, dear. I’m afraid, when our good Wang told us farewell, it was forever.”

“Yes, I know,” Ruth answered disappointedly. “It was silly of me to think of it. But just for a minute, when I saw the table all set and waiting as it used to be — oh, well! You wanted to speak to me, Granther?”

“I haven’t answered your question yet,” he pointed out. “Don’t you still want to know who’s in the kitchen?”

“Yes, of course. Only it doesn’t seem to matter so much now. Who is it, Granther? And why? We didn’t need a cook.”

“ Well, we have one, anyway. Also a gardener and odd-job man. It's rather a puzzling situation, my dear. I confess I didn't know exactly how to deal with it.”

The old gentleman removed his glasses, and his gentle blue eyes blinked helplessly in the noonday light. Molly noticed, not for the first time, how very frail he looked, sitting there behind the big desk.

Ruth perched upon his chair-arm, her strong young hand laid caressingly upon his blue-veined one.

“ Never mind, darling; I'll deal with it,” she assured him. “ Tell me all about it. Who is this mysterious person in the kitchen? ”

“ It's the man who came to see Wang,” he answered hesitantly. “ Sailor Jim, he calls himself.”

“ That man! ” Ruth could not hide the distaste in her voice. “ What did he come here for? ”

“ He says,” Dr. Curtis answered slowly, “ that Wang sent him.”

“ Wang? But why? ”

“ I'm afraid I don't understand it myself,” the old man confessed. “ Wang seems to have

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felt that we were in need of protection after he left us and to have sent this man to take his place. He was a ship's cook at one time — Jim, I mean — and professes to be very competent about the lawn and garden. I believe he said the mandarin Chu Hi once employed him in that capacity. He says that he asks no wages beyond his keep and that he will try in every way to fill Wang's place in the household."

"Well, we don't want him!" Ruth answered decidedly. "We've gotten along very nicely without a cook — or a gardener, either. The idea of his just moving in on us like that! I suppose you were too tender-hearted to tell him he couldn't. Never mind; you leave it to me. I'll attend to him."

She started to rise, but the Doctor stopped her. "You're forgetting, dear," he said mildly. "Our faithful old Wang sent this man to us; we can't turn him away as though he were some strange tramp. Wang never did anything without a motive, as you well know. I confess I can't see why we should require protection, but he was very insistent on that point. It's all very mysterious, but —"



"IT'S ALL VERY MYSTERIOUS, BUT---".- Page 106

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“ I should say it is! ” Ruth agreed. “ Protection from what? We haven't any enemies, and there's nothing here to steal. Why should any one have to protect *us*? ”

“ It's very perplexing,” the Doctor answered. “ I wondered if perhaps it could have anything to do with our young guests? You know of no danger that threatens you or your mother, my dears? ”

“ Heavens, no, nothing half so romantic! ” Babs answered promptly. “ The only danger we've ever had to worry about was the wolf at the door, and Mumsy's always been able to deal with him! I'm sure it's nothing to do with us, Doctor.”

“ Really, I feel quite upset about it.” The old man passed his hand wearily across his forehead. “ If it is true that the household is in danger — yes, I know, dear, it's a fantastic idea, but I've had good reason to respect Wang's judgment. A learned man, in his own way, and not given to idle fancies. What was I saying? Yes, yes. I'm not so young as I was, and not, I fear, physically adequate to deal with — well, emergencies. A household of women, too. This Sailor Jim seems a person

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of extraordinary physical strength. Perhaps it might be as well — ”

His thin old voice sounded so distressed that Ruth felt a pang of remorse. “ You mean you want him to stay, Granther? But, darling, of course he shall if that’s the way you feel.”

She motioned warningly to Babs, who had opened her lips to speak. “ We won’t talk any more now,” she went on soothingly. “ We’ll give Jim a trial and see how it works out, anyway. And now, how about luncheon? I’m sure it must be ready.”

She helped the old Doctor to his feet and led the way to the dining-room, Molly and Barbara following.

As soon as they were seated, Sailor Jim entered with a tray. He had made himself spick and span in one of Wang’s white jackets and was smiling cheerfully.

“ Mornin’, miss and young misses,” he said, in the voice that Babs mentally described as “ oily.” “ I reckon I give you a surprise, didn’t I? Me and the Doc here fixed it all up. My old buddy Wang sez to me, he sez — ” he flipped a smoking hot waffle deftly on to Ruth’s plate — “ ‘ Jim,’ the old heathen sez, ‘ I can’t sleep

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nights for thinkin' of the pore old gent an' the little lady left all alone with no one to pectect 'em. They need a strong man in that house, Jim, old boy,' he sez, 'an' I'd take it mighty kindly if you'd cut along and keep an eye on 'em for me.' Well, nobody never claimed that Sailor Jim wa'n't a man to oblige his friends. I had a good berth on the old *John J.*, but I never thought twice about givin' it up. 'Wang,' I sez, 'you can count on Sailor Jim.' So — ”

“ Yes, Jim, that was very nice of you,” Ruth cut in. Her tone was civil but not enthusiastic. “ We'll try to make your work as light as possible. And now, if you'd just serve the salad — ? ”

“ O. K., miss, comin' up.” Ruth's manner, however, seemed to have checked his flow of conversation, and, after serving the meal, he retired to the kitchen.

As soon as luncheon was over, Dr. Curtis went to his room for an afternoon nap. Ordinarily the old gentleman vigorously resisted Ruth's efforts to induce him to rest, but the events of the morning had upset him. Ruth lingered to draw the shades and make him comfortable and then hurried out to join Molly and Babs in the pagoda.

CHAPTER X

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

The Chinese studies suffered that afternoon. None of the girls felt like discussing anything but the strange newcomer to the household.

“I wouldn’t have let him stay a minute,” Ruth declared. “As soon as Granther told us who he was, I meant to go straight out to the kitchen and tell him he’d have to move on. But you saw how it was, girls. He had Granther all worked up over some imaginary danger. If I’d made Jim go away, the poor dear would worry night and day for fear something *might* happen — I just couldn’t have that. We’ll have to put up with him for a while, that’s all.”

“It was the only thing you could do,” Molly agreed. “Maybe after a bit, when your grandfather sees that nothing happens — and of

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course nothing will! Or *are* we perfectly sure of that? You don't think there's anything in this protection business, do you, Ruth?"

"No, I don't. I can't imagine what Wang was thinking of! He was the last person in the world to be afraid of burglars or tramps, even for us. And he knows that everybody in the county loves Granther — I simply can't understand it! It doesn't sound a bit like him, sending that man to 'protect' us."

"Did Wang say anything about it before he left?" Barbara asked. "I mean, that he wanted you to have a protector and would send you one?"

Ruth shook her head. "He never even hinted at such a thing. And that's funny, too. If Granther and I *are* in some sort of danger, something that Wang knows about but we don't, you'd think he'd have warned us then. After all, he's been gone a month, and no one has bothered us. No one's protected us, either. How does Wang know that whatever he feared didn't happen before his man got here?"

"It's certainly queer," Molly agreed. "Rather exciting, too, don't you think? 'She lived in the shadow of an unknown danger' —

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no, 'menace' sounds thrillier, or do you prefer 'terror?' What's your choice, Babs?"

"Oh, 'terror,' by all means," Barbara answered promptly. "Only somehow I can't imagine Ruthie losing sleep over any of them. Sailor Jim should have made *you* the menaced heroine, Sis; you'd play up to it a lot better."

"Well, maybe I am," Molly answered hopefully. "He said this house needed a strong man's protection, didn't he? Maybe the terror is hanging over *me*!"

"Wang would be sure to know all about *your* secret enemies, of course!" Babs replied scornfully. "That won't wash, Sis. Little as you like it, you'll have to hand over the star part to Ruth or the Doctor. You and I are just atmosphere around here."

"I suppose you're right," Molly answered reluctantly. Then, as she casually glanced at Ruth, her tone changed. "Ruthie, dear, you aren't taking this *seriously*? You *said* you didn't believe there was anything in it!"

"I know I did," Ruth answered slowly. "But the more I think about it, the more it worries me. What did Wang send Sailor Jim here *for*? It wasn't because he thought *we*

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might be nervous without an able-bodied man around the place; Wang knew us better than that. And Wang certainly wasn't the nervous type himself. If he thought we needed protection, it was because he *knew* something — something special, I mean. And, to save my life, I can't see why he didn't tell us! The whole thing isn't the least bit like him."

"I'll tell you the queerest thing about it to me," Babs broke in. "It's Wang's being so chummy with Sailor Jim. Calling him 'Jim, old boy' and all that. It doesn't sound natural. You say Wang was fond of me, Ruthie, but I'd have fallen in a heap if he'd ever called me 'Babs, old girl.' No, I can't see it."

"She's right, Ruth!" Molly exclaimed. "It's hard to imagine Wang's being so intimate with a man like Sailor Jim. Yet he must have been to send him here."

"If he did!" Babs exclaimed suddenly. "Girls, here's something we haven't thought of. Suppose Wang *didn't* send Jim here to protect us? Suppose Jim just made it up? After all, we've only got his word for it."

Ruth looked startled. "But what would he do that for? And what do you mean he made

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up, Babs? That Wang wanted him to protect us? Or that Wang wanted him to come at all? Either way it doesn't make sense."

"Well, it doesn't make sense the way he tells it, either," Babs defended her new theory. "And I don't know just what I do mean, except that we don't necessarily have to believe every word Sailor Jim says. Let's see, now. If we agree that he's not above twisting things around to suit himself, what have we got? Either that Wang did send him, but not for protection — for some other reason of Wang's own. Or — that Wang didn't send him at all and that *he* — Jim, I mean — came here for some mysterious reason of *his* own and made up that story so you'd let him stay. Which sounds the likelier?"

Ruth shook her head helplessly, and it was Molly who answered after a brief, thoughtful pause.

"The one about Wang, I think. He *could* have had some reason for wanting Jim to be here, and I can't imagine any reason why Jim would want it by himself. But what — oh, I wonder, Ruth!" She hesitated a minute as though gathering her thoughts together.

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“ Well, go on,” Ruth encouraged her. “ If you’ve got a glimmer of an idea, it’s more than I have.”

“ It may not be much, but how’s this? The mysterious riddle — could it have anything to do with that? Suppose Wang sent Jim to watch and find out if you worked it? Would he be likely to do that? ”

Ruth’s face fell. “ I’d be disappointed if he did,” she answered slowly. “ Sailor Jim! It would be different if Wang had asked me to send my solution to *him* or to — oh, say some Chinese scholar in this country or something like that. But to put a spy in my own home to watch what I was doing — no, I can’t believe it of Wang! It sounds too sneaky. He trusted me to work out the riddle in my own way if I could. He’d never think of checking up to see if I did it or how I did it; that wouldn’t be like him. I’m sure you’re wrong there, Molly.”

“ I’m sorry, Ruth; I didn’t think how it would sound,” Molly answered contritely. “ You’re right, of course. Well, that theory’s out. What do *you* think, Babs? ”

“ I think Sailor Jim’s just a common or garden liar from start to finish,” Babs answered

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calmly. "And that the quickest way of getting at the truth is to believe the opposite of everything he told us. Wang did *not* beg 'Jim, old boy' to come and look after us — and most likely doesn't even know that he's doing it. That's what *I* think! More than that, I believe I'm right."

"But, honey, that leaves it all as mysterious as ever," Ruth said helplessly. "There was some point to Jim's coming if Wang asked him to; there's none at all to his coming if he didn't. He gave up his job on the ship, where he was getting paid, to work for us for nothing. You surely don't think he's doing it just out of kindness of heart?"

"I should say not!" Babs answered emphatically. "If there's one thing I don't believe in, it's Jim's kind heart. Isn't it funny how we all have it in for him?" she added musingly. "It *could* be that way, you know, and it would explain everything. Even if Wang didn't worry about you and your Granther's having no one to look after you, his dear friend Jim might worry and volunteer his services. There *are* people in the world as self-sacrificing and generous as all that, I suppose. Only nothing would convince

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me that Sailor Jim is one of them," she said darkly.

"Nor me!" Ruth gave a weary little sigh. "It's all a hopeless tangle, and I don't know what to think. Oh, I wish Wang had never left us!"

Her voice sounded so forlorn that Molly glanced warningly at her sister. "Oh, well, we've worried our heads enough for to-day!" she said cheerfully. "There's probably some perfectly simple explanation of all this mystery. We don't really *know* Sailor Jim yet, anyway — maybe he has a heart of gold, after all. At least he's relieving you of the cooking in this hot weather, Ruth; you can be grateful for that."

"And doing very well at it, too," Babs chimed in. "He may be a villain of the deepest dye — I'm sure he is! — but he's no slouch with the waffle-iron. All I hope is that he doesn't make his getaway till I've had enough waffles to do me for the rest of my life!"

CHAPTER XI

A QUEER GOLDBLOCKS

Prejudiced though they were, the girls could not deny that Sailor Jim proved useful around the house. He was an excellent cook and kept the grounds in perfect order.

Yet their dislike persisted. Jim had an annoying habit of familiar conversation, and Ruth's gentle snubs seemed to have little effect on him. She was determined to make the best of his presence, but she could not bring herself to accept him on the friendly footing that Wang had enjoyed. The more she saw of him, the harder it was to imagine him as the self-sacrificing friend he claimed to be; and the disturbing question, "What does he want here?" was never out of her mind.

One of the most irritating things about Sailor Jim was his fondness for the pagoda — the "joss-house," he called it. On his second after-

noon the girls were at work there when Jim appeared in the open door, bearing a pail and scrubbing brushes.

"I just thought, seein' as how I got some free time on my hands, I'd give the joss-house a good cleanin'," he remarked genially. "If you young ladies won't mind takin' your books to the veranda, now, I'll get her all slick as a whistle for you."

Barbara cast an indignant glance at Ruth, who answered with quiet dignity, "Not just now, I think, Jim. We always study here in the afternoons, and we'd rather not be interrupted."

"No offense," he answered cheerfully. "I aim to please, miss. What time will you be gettin' through here? Mebbe I can work it in afore dinner."

"Thanks, Jim, but you needn't bother," Ruth replied. "I always clean the pagoda myself, anyway. You might do the bathroom floor if you have time now."

"Oh, well, just as you say, miss." His tone was distinctly sulky as he turned toward the house.

Wang had used the pagoda frequently for

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reading or quiet meditation after his work was done. Ruth had always been glad to have him share it. But it was decidedly annoying a few days later to find that Sailor Jim looked upon it as his personal sitting-room. Several times the girls found him lounging in the window-seat when they went down for evening "up-sets." He apologized profusely and hurried away, but, as Babs put it, he "disturbed the air." The smell of his strong pipe hung about the dainty curtains, and the mere fact that he sat there so often seemed to spoil the charming privacy of the little house.

He was quite deaf to Ruth's hints, and it seemed a small thing to make a fuss about. But in the second week of his stay the girls made rather a startling discovery.

"I know it's so," Babs insisted. "I've been suspicious before, but this time I'm certain. I put the books away myself yesterday in the teakwood chest. And I know I put Li Po on the bottom of the pile and the Eight Immortals on top. Now look, Ruth! There are the Immortals down near the bottom and Li Po on top. Somebody has been rummaging in this chest."

"Yes, and here's something else," Molly con-

tributed. "We haven't made tea since we had to buy it from the grocery, have we? But I put the new tea into the caddy when it came, and screwed the lid down tight. Now look at it. The lid's just lying on the caddy, not fastened down at all. Somebody has been poking around in your things, Ruth."

"Sounds a little like the Three Bears," Babs giggled. "Only there's a difference. We know who our Goldilocks is."

"Sailor Jim!" Ruth's eyes flashed with indignation. "Really, girls, this is too much! It's bad enough for him to make himself at home in here with his horrid old pipe, but to go poking and prying — well, I just won't have it!"

"I don't blame you!" Barbara exclaimed. "I wouldn't have it, either. What'll you do? Tell him to keep out?"

"I've done that as politely as I could," Ruth answered. "He knows I don't want him in here. No, I sha'n't tell him anything. I'll simply keep the place locked all the time we're not in it. And I'll take the key up to my room. That'll settle it."

"Mercy, you sound positively vicious! Hon-

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estly, Ruthie, I didn't know you had it in you. You're always so peaceable and afraid of hurting some one's feelings — it's a relief to see you explode sometimes."

Ruth laughed a little. "I suppose it's silly to be so upset, but I can't help it. The pagoda's always been my very own, and it makes me furious to think of some one's coming in like that. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

"What do you suppose he did it for?" Molly inquired. "Idle curiosity?"

"I suppose so. Just snooping. There's nothing here to steal."

"We might look around, though," Barbara put in. "Just to make sure nothing's gone. I wouldn't put it past Sailor Jim to take anything he happened to fancy."

Following her suggestion, the three girls made a quick search of the pagoda. Their eyes, sharpened now by suspicion, noted many things out of place. It was increasingly clear that the room had been thoroughly rummaged. But, so far as they could see, nothing was missing.

They locked the door and returned to the house. Ruth, instead of hanging the key on

its usual nail in the kitchen, put it in her pocket. "And here it's going to stay!" she said firmly.

They passed the kitchen door where Sailor Jim was busy with preparations for dinner, and followed the path around the house to the veranda. There they found Dr. Curtis reading in a long deck-chair. He looked up with a welcoming smile.

"Ah, girls, and how go the studies?"

They had told him of their work, but not of its object. Ruth had shown him Wang's message before she discussed it with Molly and Barbara. He had read in it only a rather flowery wish for his granddaughter's happiness, and Ruth had not felt it wise to tell him afterward that she believed it might have some deeper meaning. There was time enough for that if she succeeded in deciphering it. If she failed, there was no need for him to suffer in her disappointment. Ruth was very careful always to preserve a peaceful atmosphere for the old gentleman and never to bring to him any worries that could be avoided.

For the same reason, she did not mention her annoyance over Jim's invasion of the pagoda. Instead, she dropped to a step at his feet and

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began a cheerful account of the story she had translated that afternoon.

Barbara and Molly joined in the chat for a few minutes and then excused themselves. They had formed the habit of walking down to The Hope Chest just before closing-time to stroll home with their mother.

Mrs. Bronson's shop was doing nicely, but the responsibility and the long hours were a continuing strain. Their brisk, cheery mother never complained, but the girls realized that she was unusually tired when she came home. So, for reasons very similar to Ruth's, they had said nothing to her of the perplexities which had followed Wang's departure.

Barbara was reflecting on this as she strolled beside her sister down the tree-lined street in the direction of Mrs. Bronson's shop.

"Isn't it funny what a lot of secrets have cropped up lately?" she observed. "We're keeping all this business secret from Mummy — I mean about Wang's riddle and Sailor Jim's odd actions. Ruth's keeping it from her Granther. Sailor Jim is keeping *his* secret, whatever it is, from us. And then there's Wang's secret, which seems to be kept from everybody.

Seems to me the air around here is just thick with secrets."

Molly nodded soberly. "I know, and they seem to be getting deeper all the time. If Ruth could *only* find the answer to Wang's riddle! Somehow, I can't help thinking that that would be the answer to everything."

"But I don't see how it could," Babs argued. "Sailor Jim hasn't anything to do with the riddle, and *he's* the big mystery right now. What did he come here for? What is he looking for in the pagoda? *Did* Wang send him, and why? *Is* there an unknown danger that Ruth and her Granther must be guarded against? Why —"

"Darling, stop!" Laughing, Molly put her hands to her ears. "I can't answer any of them, and when you reel them off like that, it makes my head spin. Let's talk about something simple and refreshing for a change."

"All right, let's," Babs agreed. "How about ice-cream soda? That's both. And the only mystery about it is whether Mums will say 'Certainly not. It's too close to dinner time.'"

CHAPTER XII

SAILOR JIM IS DISPLEASED

It was the pleasant hour after dinner when the sun had just set and the long summer twilight was softly dropping its mantle of coolness. Mrs. Bronson and the Doctor were enjoying it on the front veranda, but the three girls were lounging in the hammock at the side of the house.

Suddenly Babs sat erect and pinched Ruth. "Look — there goes Sailor Jim to the pagoda. He doesn't know yet that you've locked it up. Won't he be furious?"

Jim had emerged from the kitchen door. He was in his shirt-sleeves, his short black pipe clamped between his teeth. Without a glance toward the hammock, he sauntered slowly toward the pagoda.

"Oh, maybe I shouldn't have —" Ruth began uncertainly, then checked herself. "I

don't care! He can perfectly well smoke his pipe on the back porch. Just because he's taken Wang's job, Jim needn't think he can do everything Wang did."

"I remember we used to find Wang reading there when we went down to do our evening upsets," Barbara observed. "He didn't smell up the place with a nasty old pipe, though, nor pry into things."

"Do you mind if I ask you something, Ruth?" Molly said diffidently. "I know how fond you were of Wang, and I wouldn't hurt your feelings for anything. But it's something I noticed when he was here, that I've always been curious about."

"Why, of course I won't mind, Molly," Ruth replied. "What is it?"

"Well," Molly answered hesitantly, "Wang didn't smoke a pipe, like Sailor Jim. But — maybe I just imagined it. But it seemed to me, when we used to go down and find him there, that there was a sort of smell in the air — a faint, quite pleasant smell —"

She hesitated. "Yes, I know," Ruth said. "What about it?"

"Well, I just wondered," Molly floundered.

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“ I suppose they don’t think anything of it, but — Ruth, did Wang smoke *opium*? ”

At the horrified tone in which she spoke the word, Ruth broke into ringing laughter. “ Oh, Molly, you’re priceless! I’m going to speak to your mother about your reading — honestly, you’re overdoing the thrillers, my dear! What was the last one? ‘ Limehouse Nights ’? ”

Molly looked guilty, and Ruth proceeded more soberly. “ There are all kinds of Chinese, honey — good and bad, weak ones and strong — just as there are of Americans. Opium is a common drug over there, and some wretched creatures think that it helps them forget their troubles. Our authors and movie producers have seized upon that and exaggerated it till lots of people get the same ridiculous notion that you did — that any Chinese gentleman is likely to be an opium-user. But I can relieve your mind about Wang. That smoky odor you noticed about the pagoda was incense. Wang went there to say his prayers.”

“ Oh, my goodness, I’m sorry! ” Molly answered contritely. “ I just didn’t know. I’m afraid you’re right about my reading. You’ll have to forgive me, Ruth.”

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“Of course — you can’t be blamed for the impressions you get from books. But it does make me so furious! About Wang’s religion,” she went on more calmly, “I’m just guessing at what I said a minute ago. He never told me he went to the pagoda for prayers; he never discussed religion with me at all. You see, he knows that I’m a Christian, and he’s a Buddhist. He wouldn’t say the least thing to try to turn me from my own faith; Wang was like that. But he kept to his own — he was like that, too. I know the smell of incense, and I know that it’s part of their way of praying, so I just figured it out for myself. Wang went off quietly for his prayers where he wouldn’t disturb anybody, and he never said a word about it. I wouldn’t have said anything about it, either, if you hadn’t jumped to that crazy conclusion.”

“Oh, girls, look!” Babs seized her sister’s arm excitedly. “Sailor Jim’s found out he can’t get in, and he’s not pleased a bit.”

In their discussion they had forgotten to watch the sailor. Now, following Barbara’s glance, they saw that he was returning along the walk, his face dark and lowering.

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“*He* wasn’t on his way to prayers, that’s sure,” Babs giggled.

To their surprise, instead of following the path to the kitchen door, he hesitated a moment, then struck off across the grass in their direction. As he came, the watching girls could distinctly see that he was composing his face to a pleasanter expression. When he stood before them, it was with his familiar ingratiating smile.

“Evenin’, young misses. I see as how you’ve locked up the joss-house, Miss Ruth.”

“Yes, Jim, I have.” The sisters admired the quiet finality of her voice.

“Yes — yes, I see you did.” He shuffled his feet uneasily in the grass, and his voice took on a disagreeable whine.

“I hope you didn’t take any offense ’cause I went there for a quiet smoke sometimes, miss? A poor hard-workin’ sailor-man has mighty few pleasures, and I kinda liked the little joss-house. Reminded me of China, it did, where I’ve spent most o’ me days since I went to sea. No ’arm intended, I’m sure.”

“Certainly not, Jim,” Ruth answered demurely, but there was a wicked edge in her voice

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as she added, "Have you ever tried smoking your pipe on the back steps? You can see the pagoda from there, and it will remind you of China all the more, for I suppose you spent more time outside of pagodas than in them, didn't you?"

He gave her a venomous glance, but his voice was smooth enough as he answered, "Mebbe there's somethin' in what you say, miss. I'll try it that way. Evenin', all."

Deliberately he lighted his pipe, and it seemed to the girls that the dragons tattooed on his wrists writhed malignantly in the red glare of the match. Then, without another word, he turned away and slouched toward the kitchen.

Before they could comment upon the scene, Mrs. Bronson came around the house.

"If you girls will all come up to my room, I've a surprise for somebody," she said cheerfully. "I don't know just who's the lucky one, though."

"Oh, Mumsy, is it a dress?" Molly sprang to her feet. "You said, if no one bought that pale rose organdie, I could have it. *Is* it the organdie, Mums?"

Mrs. Bronson shook her head. "I still have

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hopes of a cash customer there, chicken. No, this is a sports frock in wash silk — Roman stripes, and very gorgeous. That pretty Henderson girl bought it — or, at least, she made a deposit on it. It had to be altered a lot; she has broad shoulders and an unusually slender waist, and the ready-mades don't come like that. Well, she tried it on after we got it to fit, and *then* she decided there were too many colors, and she wouldn't take it, after all. That leaves me with a perfectly good dress on my hands I can never sell. So I thought if one of you could wear it — ”

“ Oh, I hope I can! ” Barbara followed her mother eagerly, for the mention of sports frocks always excited her.

Once upstairs, however, the first glance at the dress dispelled Barbara's hopes. It was much too long and, as she regretfully admitted, too old for her. Neither did it suit Molly in color or design.

“ Well, Ruth — ” Mrs. Bronson slipped it over the shining chestnut head. “ Turn around, child, and let me see. H-m-m, too wide in the shoulders, of course, but we can fix that. It's the waist that can't be changed now — and

thank heaven, it doesn't need to be! Yes, it's perfect. I guess you're the owner, dear."

"Oh, Mrs. Bronson, I couldn't take it!" Ruth protested, but her fascinated eyes sought the mirror. The vivid stripes on a creamy ground brought out all the color in her cheeks; except for a slight bunchiness at the shoulders, the lines were perfect on her.

"I've never had anything like it," Ruth said simply. "It's the most adorable thing I ever saw. But you don't really mean —"

"Of course I do. Why, child, you're just like another daughter to me. Can't I make you a little gift if I want to? There, now, skip down and ask the Doctor how he likes it."

Ruth gave her an impulsive hug. "Oh, you're such a darling! Thanks, a thousand times. Come on, girls, let's open Granther's eyes."

They found the old Doctor alone on the veranda. It was dark now, and Ruth switched on the porch light as she came through the door. The old man looked up with his usual welcoming smile, but the hand that he laid on the shimmering silk was shaking.

"Very nice, dear," he said. "I hope you

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thanked Mrs. Bronson properly. She is a good friend to you, Ruthie, a good friend."

His voice quavered alarmingly, and the joyous excitement faded from Ruth's face.

"Aren't you well, Granther?" she asked anxiously. "Come and let me get you to bed; it's damp out here."

"I'm all right, child. It's — I've been a little upset, that's all. Such a pack of nonsense; I couldn't make head nor tail of it. Why couldn't the man tell a straight story?"

"What man?" Then instinctively Ruth supplied the answer to her own question. "Sailor Jim! Has he been bothering you, Granther? What did he want?"

"Sit down, girls." The old gentleman motioned to the porch steps. "I'll tell you all about it."

He waited until they had found cushions at his feet, and then began: "Jim came out here right after Mrs. Bronson went upstairs. First he had a complaint to make. He said that you were keeping the pagoda locked up, Ruth, and that he didn't see why he couldn't be allowed to sit there and smoke his pipe. He seemed quite put out about it. I told him, of course, that

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Wang built the pagoda for you and that you had a perfect right to do as you pleased with it. Well, he got almost violent, my dear. Tried to insist that I make you let him use it. I had to speak quite sharply to him."

Ruth smiled tenderly. "I'll bet you scared him to death, you old fire-eater! Well, I guess we've settled him, between us. Come on to bed, darling, and don't give him another thought."

The old gentleman held up his hand. "Wait — that isn't all. Ruthie, do you know anything about a jade box containing a string of pearls?"

CHAPTER XIII

IS IT LIKELY?

“Heavens, no!” Ruth stared at him. “All the pearls I’ve had anything to do with were the dime-store kind. What did he *mean*, Granther?”

“I don’t know. It was all so confused — really, I wondered if the man had suddenly gone mad. I do wish Wang hadn’t left us. I’m not used to such disturbances.”

“Oh, well, you mustn’t pay any attention to him,” Ruth answered soothingly. “Can you tell us just what he said? Then I’ll talk to him and tell him he can’t stay here if he’s going to upset you like this.”

“I hardly know now what he did say,” the old Doctor answered. “Let me see if I can straighten it out. First about not being allowed in the pagoda — I told you that. And then, after I’d rebuked him, he came closer and

stuck his ugly face right into mine — really, he is a most unpleasant person. I can't think why Wang ever sent him to us."

"Yes, dear," Ruth urged. "And what did he say?"

"Why, something about two heads being better than one. He said it was plain we hadn't found 'the stuff' and that he would frankly admit he hadn't either. Then he launched into an extravagant explanation of why he was searching — all to help us, of course, and to surprise us with good news. I hope I'm not a suspicious man, my dear, but it sounded most improbable. I simply can't see Sailor Jim in the rôle of a good fairy."

"Nor I!" Ruth agreed emphatically. "But, Granther, go on. What was he getting at?"

"I can only tell you what he said, my dear; I can't attempt to reconcile it with common sense. He seemed to know, and to assume that we knew, that Wang had left some fabulous treasure hidden in the pagoda. He has been unable to locate it himself and seemed sure that we also have failed. So he proposes that we join forces. Or, rather, that he and I do so.

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He was very emphatic about not 'letting a pack of kids mess into it.' Those were his rather inelegant words, Ruth. He tried to make me promise that I wouldn't speak of it to you until the pagoda had been torn down."

"Torn down! My pagoda! Granther, what *are* you talking about?"

"Why, you see, dear, that was his plan for finding the treasure. He was sure that Wang had hidden it there, and, as a thorough search had failed to locate it, he thought the place should be taken apart, piece by piece. It could hardly escape coming to light then."

"I never heard of such a thing!" Ruth answered indignantly. "Wait till I see Mr. Sailor Jim again! If I don't tell him a few things —"

"But what about the pearls, Doctor?" Molly put in. "Oh, this is exciting! Did he say that the treasure consisted of pearls? How did he know?"

"Why, he says that he brought them over when he came for Wang — that the mandarin Chu Hi entrusted them to him. A string of perfect pearls in a carved box of white jade, and worth a great deal of money, he says. He

offered, as a proof of his honesty, his turning them over to Wang safely, but I'm not much impressed by that. Chu Hi's arm is long, and I daresay Jim would have been in grave peril, had he attempted to run away with the pearls before they reached their destination."

"But what makes him think they're here?" asked Barbara interestedly. "If the mandarin sent them to Wang, why, Wang probably took them with him."

"Sailor Jim has an excellent reason for knowing that Wang did not take them," the Doctor answered. "He confessed quite brazenly that on the train to San Francisco he searched Wang's pockets while he slept. Oh, of course he offered an excuse — he was afraid that Wang would be robbed, and wanted to make sure that the pearls were safe. That's rather thin, I'm afraid."

"Well, my goodness, he *is* a villain!" Babs exclaimed delightedly. "Aren't you excited, Ruth? A villain and a treasure right here in your own house? Oh, this *is* better than a movie!"

"No, I'm not excited; I'm just plain mad!" Ruth replied. "The idea of trying to get

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Granther to tear down my pagoda — and behind my back! It makes me boil!”

“I know, but the treasure, honey — aren’t you excited about that? Priceless pearls in your own pagoda — think of it!”

Ruth shook her head scornfully. “Who can believe anything that creature says? He’s just annoyed because I wouldn’t let him sit in the pagoda, and out of pure spite he tried to get Granther to tear it down. He made up all that stuff about the treasure just for an excuse.”

Barbara’s face fell. “Oh, Ruth, do you think so? Well, I suppose you’re right; it sounds too good to be true. What are you going to do now?”

Ruth was pale but determined. “I’m going to discharge Sailor Jim the first thing tomorrow morning. I don’t know why Wang wanted him to be here, but I’m sure Wang wouldn’t expect us to keep him after the way he’s acted. You feel that way, too, don’t you, Granther? You’re not to worry yourself about it; I’ll attend to everything. And now, dear, if you’re ready to go upstairs —”

“Just about. But before I go —” there was a twinkle in the old gentleman’s eye now.

“Ruthie, dear, would you mind stating to your young friends here just what relation I happen to be to you? It is possible that they are laboring under a misapprehension.”

Ruth stared. “What do you mean, dear? They know you’re my darling Granther.”

“Thank you. You hear that, girls? You see she admits that I’m not really her two-year-old son, after all. It’s just her way of managing me that gives you that impression.”

“Granther!” There was mirthful vexation in Ruth’s voice. “When I was only trying to spare you —”

“I know, dear. Merely my little joke. Just leading up, as gently as possible, to my final news. I discharged Sailor Jim myself this evening. I told him, of course, that he was free to remain here until he could make other arrangements. However, he informed me very huffily that he was never one to stay where he wasn’t wanted and that he would clear out the first thing to-morrow morning.”

“Why, Granther!” Ruth gasped. “Well, bless your heart! Maybe I’m not running this house, after all.”

“You do very well at it, my dear,” the Doc-

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tor answered. "But occasionally a situation comes up that needs a man's firm hand. Now let's put that scoundrel out of our minds." He rose to his feet. "I believe, and I sincerely hope, that we've seen the last of Sailor Jim."

CHAPTER XIV

A SPLENDID DREAM

“But I just hate to think there aren’t any pearls,” Babs said wistfully.

It was the following afternoon. No trace of Sailor Jim had remained when the household wakened that morning. Ruth had gladly taken up her duties again, with the assistance of Barbara and Molly. They were late in arriving at the pagoda, and it developed that no one felt particularly like studying.

“But, Babs, it’s such an unlikely story,” Ruth argued. “If the mandarin sent pearls to Wang, he’d have taken them with him, or else given them to Granther to look after. Why should he hide them in the pagoda? He doesn’t mean to come back. There wouldn’t be any sense in it. No, I think my theory’s the right one. Jim wanted the pagoda torn down out of pure spite for me, and he invented that story to get Granther to do it.”

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“ He didn’t know the Doctor very well, did he? ” Babs chuckled. “ I’d love to have heard what he said to Jim.”

“ Ruth, I think you’re wrong,” Molly said thoughtfully. “ I believe the pearls do exist and are for you to find.”

“ Oh, well, you would,” Ruth answered with good-natured scorn. “ I suppose the mysterious Chinamen in those books you read hide priceless pearls in every corner.”

“ No, seriously, I mean it,” Molly protested. “ It explains a lot. We’ve been puzzling our heads over Jim’s reason for coming here, and the pearls make a perfectly good one. I couldn’t imagine his doing it out of pure kindness of heart, but I can imagine his taking any amount of trouble if there was something to be gained by it.”

“ You think he wanted the pearls — if there are any — for himself? ”

“ I’ll tell you exactly what I think.” Molly sat up and spoke with conviction. “ I don’t believe that Wang sent Sailor Jim here or even knew he was coming. I do believe that Jim brought the pearls with the mandarin’s message. Perhaps Wang told him that he meant

to leave them hidden here — why, I can't imagine. But just suppose he did."

"Maybe Wang didn't tell him," Babs put in interestedly. "I can't see him confiding in Jim, some way. But Jim knew he had the pearls, and he made sure on the train that he wasn't taking them away with him. Then — let's see. Jim could have sneaked down the hall while he was supposed to be waiting outside for Wang to say good-by, and found out that Wang didn't give them to the doctor. I wonder what made him think Wang hid them in the pagoda? There are plenty of hiding-places around this old house besides that."

"He'd had plenty of chances to search Wang's own room — and the rest of the house, for that matter, while he was doing the house-work," Molly reminded her. "But he was with Wang that night and knew where he went — oh, I've just thought of something! Babs, do you remember we saw a light in the pagoda when I got up to get a blanket? Wang must have been out here then. And Jim knew it, and *that's* why he's so sure Wang left the pearls in here!"

"Then he saw Wang safely aboard his ship

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—” Babs took up the story excitedly — “and came back here. He made up a tale about Wang’s sending him, so you’d let him stay, Ruth. And he started right away searching for the treasure! Once he got it, of course, he’d put it in his pocket and quietly fade away. Why, Sis, you’re right; that accounts for everything! Jim’s reason for coming, his rummaging around in here, and his fury when we locked him out — it all fits in.”

“And when you locked up the pagoda, Ruth,” Molly finished, “he saw it was no use trying any longer by himself, so he went to the Doctor. He thought a share was better than nothing. There, Ruthie, that’s my theory. What do you think of it?”

Ruth smiled. “Not much,” she answered candidly. “It’s a beautiful fairy-tale, and I only wish it could be true. But we know it isn’t because — well, where *are* these mysterious pearls, then? Sailor Jim turned the pagoda upside down and couldn’t find them. And only yesterday we went over the whole place ourselves to see if he’d taken anything. Did you notice any pearls about? I didn’t.”

“There aren’t many places to look,” Babs

admitted. "Just the chest and the bookshelves — oh, I wonder if Jim thought they might be buried in the tea-caddy? Of course he did; that's why he had the lid off. A perfectly good hiding-place, too —"

"Except that they'd be found by the first person who wanted a cup of tea," her sister interrupted crushingly. "No, you needn't get up to look, Babs. I put that tea in there myself a week ago, and there weren't any pearls rolling around on the bottom then."

"Of course, I forgot," Babs answered disappointedly. "Well, where else is there?" Her eyes roved about the bare little room. "Are there any *secret* hiding-places here, Ruth? In the floor or the walls —"

Ruth shook her head. "I've played in here since I was three, and I never saw any. There's nothing to it, really, girls. Just a sailor's yarn. Do we have to go on talking about that creature? He's gone, and I'm glad of it. All I want now is to forget that I ever saw him."

"Well, all right, dear, if you feel that way," Molly agreed reluctantly. "I suppose we ought to get to work, but it's hard to settle down after all the excitement. Besides, Ruth,

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I think I've gone just about as far as I can. I've managed to learn to read Chinese well enough to translate some of the simpler stories and poems, and I've picked up here and there a glimmer of meaning in the longer ones. That's a lot more than I'd hoped for, and I've enjoyed it immensely. But it's about my limit, without a teacher to help."

Ruth gave a little sigh. "I was thinking the very same thing, Molly — about myself, I mean. I can't get any farther along without some one who knows more than I do. If only Wang could be here now!"

"Do they teach Chinese in colleges?" Barbara asked. "American ones, I mean."

"I don't know about all of them, but there's one that does — Sinai College, where my father and mother went. It's a training-school for missionaries, and they have a wonderful Chinese department. Their medical school is splendid, too; they specialize in Oriental diseases. I wonder —" her voice sounded suddenly shy — "I wonder if you girls would laugh if I told you the dream of my life? It's just a dream, and it can never come true; I know that now. When I was little, I was

firmly convinced I could make it come true, but, now that I'm older, I know better, and I've given it up long since. But just the same, if I could do what I'd rather do than anything else in the world, I'd — I'd — ”

“ Go on, honey,” Molly urged, as she hesitated. “ We won't laugh. It can't be any sillier than my cherished dream of being a famous actress — or Barbara's of being another Helen Wills. Tell us! ”

“ Well — ” Ruth laughed a little, but her eyes were earnest. “ When I finish high school next year, I'll go into the county hospital for a nurse's training. There's no money to send me to college, and I'll have to earn my living some way. But — if only dreams came true, this is what I'd do. I'd go to Sinai College, and I'd work my head off to learn to be a doctor. And then, when I got my degree, I'd go right out to China to *their* hospital. There'd be a place for me, I know. It's being carried on now by native doctors who worked under my parents, and they don't forget. And I'd go on with *their* work — oh, I know it's all perfectly impossible! But it's the one thing in the world I'd give anything to do.”

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Her usually calm eyes were alight, her face flushed to beauty with her enthusiasm.

“ Oh, Ruthie, I wish you could! ” Babs exclaimed. “ It’s terrible, being poor. Molly and I aren’t a bit sure of college, either. Mumsy says of course we’re going, but we’ve already decided we’re not if it means a lot of sacrifice for *her*. We’re not going to have her do without and wear herself to a shadow in the shop — ”

“ Hush, kitten! ” Molly interrupted her. “ Never mind us. Go on, Ruth. *Why* is it so impossible? Is it just the money? ”

“ That and other things. I couldn’t leave Granther to go so far away — he isn’t so young any more, and I’m all he has in the world. You mustn’t look so sorry for me, girls. I haven’t thought of it seriously for years — not since I was ten or so. Everything looks so easy when you’re that age, you know. ” She sighed with the pity of grown-up sixteen for the rosy dreams of a ten-year-old.

“ Ruth, listen! ” Molly exclaimed suddenly. “ I’ve just had a thought. Did Wang know anything about this? ”

“ Oh, of course, ” Ruth answered wonderingly. “ He was the only one who did. Why,

he put it into my head in the first place! When I was quite tiny, he used to talk about my parents' wonderful work in China and describe the hospital and its gardens — it was like a picture of fairyland to me. And when I said I was going there, too, when I grow up, he humored me and said of course I was. We used to play hospital for hours!"

"What did the Doctor think of the idea?"

"I don't think I ever told him. He'd given my parents to China, you know; I was all he had left. I don't suppose I reasoned it out that it would hurt him to know that I planned to leave him, too, but I must have felt it. It was a little secret game that Wang and I played between ourselves. This is the first time I've told any one else."

"Well, I wish you'd told us before!" Molly exclaimed, so vehemently that Ruth looked at her in surprise. "Don't you see what it means, Ruth? You say that Wang painted all those beautiful pictures when you were small, and put it into your head to want to carry on your parents' work. Don't you suppose he had a reason for that? Remember that Wang told you he was carrying out his master's orders in

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staying here. Think, Ruth — think what it means! ”

“ I’m sorry, Molly — I must be awfully stupid. Does it mean anything special? ”

“ Of course it does! It means that the mandarin Chu Hi wanted you to come back to China to go on with the work your parents began. That was why he wanted you to know China, as the Chinese do, through their ancient classics. And so he had Wang stay here all these years to inspire you and teach you — why, it’s perfectly clear! ”

“ I never thought of that! But — but then — all that about being the Keeper of the Wall fits in! Chu Hi would hand down the old wisdom to me, as he would have done to his son if he had lived. And *I* would have been in China, keeping the Wall — helping his country — ”

“ And adding more bricks to the Wall with the new knowledge you brought! ” Molly finished triumphantly. “ Honestly, I’m getting so I think in figures of speech myself. But that was the idea, Ruth, without a doubt. It’s all so plain now; why didn’t we think of it before? ”

“ It wouldn’t have done us much good,” Ruth answered somberly. “ You’re forgetting

something, Molly. It was a wonderful plan, but I ruined it long ago. I had my chance and threw it away. Oh, what *made* me so stupid? ”

“ Now, none of that,” Babs put in briskly. “ You may not have studied much when Wang was here, but you’ve made up for it these last few weeks. With what you already know and what you could learn at college, you’d have a perfectly good Chinese education. And that’s what they wanted for you, isn’t it? ”

“ Yes, but you forget, Babs,” Ruth sighed. “ I’m not going to college, and Wang will never know that I tried to catch up after he left us. It’s too late now.”

“ Oh, *no*, Ruth! ” Molly protested. “ You’re forgetting something, too. There was Wang’s note, you know.”

“ I’m not forgetting that. It’s the very thing that makes me sure it’s too late.”

“ What do you mean? ”

“ Well, we thought that the riddle was a test to see if I really had learned, or absorbed, what Wang had tried to teach me. If I could find the answer to it, it would prove that I had. And — don’t you see? I’ve proved that I was a failure. I haven’t found the answer.”

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“ You mean you haven’t found it *yet*,” Molly answered staunchly.

“ Bless you, Molly! ” Ruth managed a laugh. “ I don’t know what I ever did without you two. Do you really think I *will* find it some time? ”

“ Certainly we do,” Molly replied seriously. “ It may not be to-day or to-morrow, but you’ll find it. Of course you will! ”

“ Well, I’m going to keep on trying,” Ruth answered with new determination. “ Wang may never know, but you girls will, and I’m not going to quit as long as you go on believing in me! ”

CHAPTER XV

THE EYE OF THE UNINSTRUCTED

Although by common consent the Chinese study class had disbanded, the girls continued their habit of meeting in the pagoda almost every afternoon.

Babs, solemnly stating that she had "sprained her brain" over the Chinese classics, had taken up knitting as a relaxation and was enthusiastically at work on a matching sweater and beret in white wool. Molly and Ruth usually brought magazines or books with them.

On an afternoon about a week after Sailor Jim's abrupt departure they were gathered as usual. Molly was absorbed in a book, but Barbara's keen eyes noticed that Ruth read listlessly, frequently raising her eyes to gaze dreamily out toward the sun-drenched lawn.

A little frown puckered Barbara's forehead as she bent over her knitting. She was worried

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about Ruth. Ever since their last talk on the day they had discussed her cherished dream, she had been silent and preoccupied. She carried the little slip of paper containing Wang's farewell message with her constantly, and the girls would find her poring over it at odd times. Yet all her puzzling had brought her no nearer the solution, and Babs ached to feel that her friend's mind would not be at rest until the mystery was cleared up.

If only there were some way that she and Molly could help! But that was impossible for two reasons: first, that they didn't know how; second, and more important, that this was Ruth's job, her test, and they had no right to intrude. But if only —

Molly looked up from her book and caught Barbara's frowning glance. "Worrying about the sweater, honey?" she asked. "I think it's going to come out all right, now that you were bright enough to dispense with the sleeves. I still think you're making a mistake by making it all white, though."

With relief, Babs dismissed her worries for the new subject. "I'm beginning to think so, too, Sis. I brought some lovely jade-green

wool along this afternoon — do you think a few green stripes would be an improvement, or what would you suggest? ”

“ Why, I don’t know — oh, I like that green! Why don’t you make some sort of design with it instead of stripes? A swastika or something? ”

“ I hadn’t thought of that,” Babs answered doubtfully. “ I wonder if I could do it without a pattern? ” She glanced about the room, and her eye fell on the far wall with its panels of Chinese characters.

“ Oh, Molly, here’s an idea! ” she exclaimed. “ Why couldn’t I make it Chinese? I think I could copy one of the simpler signs, maybe. Don’t you think that would be an original touch? ”

“ Lovely! That’s the right Chinese jade, too — it’ll look like imported work.” Molly’s eyes scanned the panels opposite her. “ Which one could you use? There’s the ‘long life’ sign; you see it on a lot of Chinese-made things.”

“ Too complicated, I’m afraid. Um, let’s see. I like ‘the East,’ with the sun shining through a treetop, but I don’t believe I could

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manage it, either. Besides, I want one that means something — especially nice. Maybe it'll bring me good luck!"

" 'Happiness?' " Molly suggested. " It's easy — plain straight lines. A square field with a mouth over it — it really means 'enough to eat.' That's a poor coolie's idea of happiness, I guess."

" Yes, I know." Babs was absently tracing the figure in the air. " I don't believe it would be too hard." She rose and walked over to examine the wall more closely. " What a lot of 'happineses' there are!" she exclaimed. " Two in the second row, one in this column, two over there, and two — no, three in the corner. Happiness all over the place."

" Well, Wang would naturally pick out some cheerful mottoes for a playroom," Molly was beginning, when she stopped short, staring at Ruth.

Ruth had thrown aside her book and had sprung to her feet so quickly that the pillows were scattered in every direction. With what Babs afterwards described as "a kangaroo leap," she stood beside them, catching Barbara's arm in a tense clasp that hurt.

“*What did you say?*” she demanded, her voice hoarse with excitement.

Babs stared into her blazing eyes, utterly bewildered. “I didn’t say anything, Ruth. What’s the matter with you?”

“You did! Just now —” she struggled a moment and subdued her obvious excitement. “Sorry, honey, I didn’t mean to jump at you that way. But, Babs, will you please say it again — what you just said to Molly?”

“The woman’s gone mad; we’ll have to humor her!” Babs hissed in a dramatic aside to her sister. But seeing that Ruth was waiting, quivering with impatience, she hastened to answer her.

“I just said there were a lot of ‘happiness’ signs on the wall here, Ruthie. That’s all. What’s all the fuss about?”

“Happiness all over the place — that’s what you said.” Ruth’s voice had fallen to an awed whisper. “Oh, Babs, you *darling!*” She crushed the younger girl to her in a breathtaking hug. Then her arms dropped. She drew a long breath and turned to face them.

“Girls,” she said falteringly, “you’ve been the dearest friends, the best pals any one could

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have. You know what I've been trying to do and how much it means to me. You've helped me every step of the way, cheered and encouraged me when I was ready to give up. Now —" her eyes beseeched them — "I've come to the place where I have to stand or fall by myself. Will you help me do *that*?"

"Of course we will!" Babs was puzzled but loyal. "Whatever you say, Ruthie, old girl. But what's all this about, anyway?"

"I think I know." Molly's lovely eyes glowed with sympathy. "It's about the riddle, isn't it, Ruth? You've found a clue at last? Just tell us what you want us to do, dear; you know you can count on us."

"Don't I know it?" There were tears behind Ruth's smile. "Yes, it *is* a clue, Molly. I think — I hope — oh, I'm afraid to think or hope! But — well, this is my job. I have to go on alone. You do see that, don't you? And I wonder — would you mind just leaving me here by myself for a while? I don't want to be rude, but —"

"Of course not; we understand!" Molly answered warmly. "Come on, Babs. And close your mouth; you look simple! We won't dis-

turb you, Ruth, and we'll see that no one else does." She put an arm about Ruth's shoulder and kissed her. "All the luck in the world, honey!"

The yellow door closed behind them, and Ruth was alone in the pagoda.

CHAPTER XVI

DISTURBING NEWS

Molly and Babs retreated only as far as the hammock at the side of the house. They wanted to be far enough away so Ruth would feel herself alone; yet they were anxious to “stand by,” to be ready if she needed them.

Babs had left her knitting behind, but, as she said, it didn't really matter, for she was much too excited to go on with it. The book which Molly had found so absorbing a few minutes ago had lost its charm now, and the two sisters sat side by side in the hammock, trying their best to be patient.

“I still don't know what it's all about,” Babs complained. “Do you, Sis? What *was* it that got her all stirred up so suddenly?”

“Why, it was what you said about the ‘happiness’ signs. Don't you remember the first words of the riddle? ‘Wouldst thou find hap-

piness? The eye of the uninstructed seeth it in many places ' — I forget the rest of it. Anyway, you said that happiness seemed to be all over the place; remember? ”

“ Yes, but I still don't see — wait, I do, too! She thinks the riddle refers to the Chinese writing on the wall; is that it? ”

“ I think so. It seems quite reasonable, too — I wonder why we never thought of it before. Wang built the pagoda and put the mottoes there; he spent a lot of time in it, and he knew Ruth did. Oh, I'm so glad she's getting somewhere at last! ”

“ So am I! ” Babs breathed thankfully. “ She was feeling so discouraged — oh, I do hope this doesn't turn out a false alarm! I just can't *stand* having her disappointed again. ”

“ I know; I feel that way, too. Well, all we can do is wait and see. At least she has something to work on, now. That means a lot. ”

The girls relapsed into anxious silence, their eyes fixed upon the closed yellow door of the pagoda.

The summer sun seemed to stand still in the sky of cloudless blue. The afternoon was warm, but not unpleasantly so. A lazy breeze

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ruffled the treetops, bringing a scent of fresh-cut hay from the meadows beyond the town.

Catalpa Street, as usual at this time of day, was practically empty. Once a troop of Boy Scouts, bound for a hike, went by with joyous whoops. The grocer's wagon with its fat white horse meandered slowly past. Across the street they could see young Mrs. Corbin settling her baby in its pram under the trees for an afternoon nap. Not a sound nor a movement came from the pagoda.

Gradually Barbara's excited bouncings in the hammock ceased. It was a drowsy afternoon, and drowsiness was creeping over her. Molly had opened her book again and was either interested or pretending to be. Barbara's eyes ached from watching the yellow door, and her head drooped back against the pillows.

The unexpected slamming of the kitchen screened door startled her from what was almost a doze. Dr. Curtis had come out and was standing there, his near-sighted eyes blinking uncertainly.

With a bound, Babs was out of the hammock and running to him.

"Did you want Ruthie, Doctor? She's in

the pagoda. She's — she's rather busy. Won't I do instead? ”

The old man patted the shining head. “Thank you, child. It's nothing that can't wait. Is that your sister in the hammock yonder? How nice and cool it looks under the trees!” He drew out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

“Come over and join us,” Babs invited eagerly. “You've been down-town, haven't you? Was it awfully hot?” She pulled up a hickory rocker, and the doctor sank into it gratefully.

“Pretty warm.” He smiled an acknowledgment of Molly's greeting as he answered Babs' question. “I try to spare myself the heat of the day usually, but this was an emergency call. My old friend Judge Doyle tried to climb a telephone post in that new car of his and shook himself up pretty badly.”

“Oh, that's too bad,” Molly exclaimed. “The Judge is Mumsy's landlord, you know, Babs. Was he seriously hurt, Doctor?”

Dr. Curtis shook his head. “Not even enough to teach him a lesson, I'm afraid. We got him home, and I left him resting quite com-

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fortably. I noticed a rather odd thing over there," he added musingly. "On second thought, I don't know that I'll mention it to Ruthie. Still — well, I'll see what you two think. Judge Doyle has a new gardener, girls. And who do you think he is? "

"I can't imagine," Babs answered wonderingly.

"Our old friend Sailor Jim. And he had the effrontery to say that we would recommend him. The Judge said he'd meant to call me up and verify that, but his lawn was in terrible shape, and he put the man to work at once. Then it seems that Jim did such a good job that he didn't bother any more about it."

"Why, the very idea!" Babs exclaimed indignantly. "I hope you told him — "

"No, I didn't want to excite the Judge after his shaking up, so I said nothing. After all, Jim is an efficient gardener, and I have no right to interfere with a man's efforts to earn an honest living. Mrs. Doyle called him to help me get the Judge upstairs, and I must say he was quite civil and obliging."

"Why, I had no idea he was still in Pleasant Hill!" Molly exclaimed. "I thought of course

he'd go back to the sea or to China or wherever he *did* come from. What do you suppose he wants to stay here for? ”

“ I can't imagine. His ways are mysteries to me. Do you think I'd better tell Ruth, girls? She always disliked him so much that I'm afraid she'll be upset at finding that he's a neighbor.”

“ A neighbor? ”

“ Why, yes. The Doyles live right down the street, you know. That big white house on the corner at Prairie Avenue — the third block from us, it would be.”

“ Then you'll have to tell Ruth, I think,” Molly answered thoughtfully. “ She'll be sure to see him sooner or later, anyway. I don't suppose — ”

Her sentence was never finished. For the pagoda door had opened at last. Ruth stood in the doorway, beckoning to them.

“ Granther, will you come, too? ” she called. “ I was going to ask the girls to get you. Will you all come, please? ”

CHAPTER XVII

THE RIDDLE IS READ

Dr. Curtis sat on the teakwood chest with Molly and Babs on either side. Ruth stood before them, very tall and straight, her cheeks flushed and her hands nervously clasping and unclasping.

“ I’ve got to do a lot of explaining, and I’m not very good at it,” she began falteringly. “ Will you all be just as patient with me as you can? You girls know what I’ve been trying to do, but Granther doesn’t, and I want to go over the whole thing again anyway. It’s all pretty important, and I want to be sure everything’s clear.”

She hesitated a minute. Molly and Babs waited breathlessly, while Dr. Curtis looked decidedly bewildered. But no one spoke, and Ruth went on in her low, eager voice.

“ You remember when Wang told us good-

by, Granther? He spoke of how he had tried to educate me in the Chinese way because the mandarin Chu Hi wished it? I don't know how much attention you paid, dear, when Wang used to give me lessons out here in the pagoda a long time ago, when I was a little thing. You were pretty busy then, and I guess you thought Wang was just trying to amuse me and keep me out of mischief."

She paused, and Dr. Curtis nodded. "I certainly didn't attach any great importance to it, Ruth. Wang never told me that he was following instructions from Chu Hi or that there was any serious purpose in your studies. I was completely taken aback when Wang spoke as he did in our last talk."

"That was what I thought," Ruth went on. "You see, the whole idea was that I was to make my own choice. Wang was to offer me the chance to become a Chinese scholar, but not to try in any way to *make* me do it unless I really felt drawn to it. He didn't urge me when I lost interest, and I never dreamed that he took it to heart so. Until that last talk, when he was going away — then I realized all it had meant to him and how I had disappointed him."

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“ But, my dear, you mustn’t let it trouble you now,” the Doctor protested. “ It’s over and done with. Why distress yourself about it? ”

“ I’m not distressed, Granther,” Ruth answered swiftly. “ I’m only trying to explain. I’ll hurry along, though. You remember that, at the very last, Wang found an excuse for me? He said that perhaps I really had learned more by instinct than he knew? Well, and then he gave me this paper, the thing we’ve always called Wang’s riddle. I showed it to you, Granther; you thought it was his way of saying good-by.”

“ I remember,” the old gentleman agreed. “ You believe it had some further meaning? ”

“ Not at first,” Ruth replied. “ But I talked it over with the girls here, and Molly suggested that perhaps it was a test, a chance to prove that I really *had* learned something from my Chinese lessons. Does that seem reasonable to you, Granther? ”

“ Why, bless my soul, it does ; it does indeed,” Dr. Curtis answered interestedly. “ Although I confess I should never have thought of it myself. But — yes, it is very much in keeping

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with the Chinese character as I know it. Go on, my dear. Are we to understand that you have read the riddle? ”

“ I tried,” Ruth answered, with a little catch in her voice. “ You don’t know how hard I’ve studied, Granther, trying to find something in the Chinese books that would explain it to me. None of it seemed to help, though, and I was just about ready to give it up. And then to-day something Babs said put me on the right track at last.”

“ Now wait a minute! ” Babs interposed. “ I love to have credit for bright inspirations, but I can’t claim any here. What I said didn’t make any difference, Ruth. It was just an accident. If I hadn’t said it, you’d have noticed all the ‘ happinesses ’ yourself, sooner or later, and connected them with the riddle — if there is any connection,” she finished doubtfully. “ You haven’t told us yet if your clue led to anything.”

“ I’m coming to that now,” Ruth answered breathlessly. “ But first I want to read the riddle to you all again.” She took the paper from her pocket, but she scarcely glanced at it as she recited:

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“Wouldst thou find happiness?”

“The eye of the uninstructed seeth it in many places, but the learned person is not deceived. For where shall happiness lie, save between the bringers of brightness, below that which is highest, and above the one of all most miserable?”

“Yet shall it not be thine until thou hast thrust it from thee!”

“And what I said, Doctor,” Babs explained, “was that there were a lot of ‘happiness’ signs on the wall over there. And then Ruth asked us to leave her alone in the pagoda while she tried to work out the riddle. We were waiting for her to call us when you found us in the hammock. So now you know as much about this as Sis and I do.”

“I can see, too, that Ruth has had staunch allies in her quest,” the Doctor smiled. “Go on, Ruthie dear. What comes next?”

“I want to know if any of you can tell me the answer to the riddle I just read.”

Blank silence answered her. “I asked,” she went on, vainly trying to keep the excitement out of her voice, “because I want to be perfectly sure I did it alone. Oh, I was helped every step of the way by these darling girls, Granther —

you don't know how splendid they've been! But the very last step, the actual reading of the riddle — that has to be *mine*. Wang may never know, but I've *got* to prove to myself that I was able to pass his test!"

She looked so desperately anxious that they all hastened to reassure her. The riddle, even with the hint that it had something to do with the writing on the wall, was still a riddle to her hearers.

With hands that trembled a little, she drew them over to the wall which was covered with texts.

" 'Wouldst thou find happiness?' " she quoted solemnly. " 'The eye of the uninstructed seeth it in many places.' Do you see, Granther? Here's 'happiness,' and here, and here."

" Yes, even an uninstructed eye like mine can see that," he answered gently. " What next, child? "

" 'Between the bringers of brightness,' " she went on. " Look at the wall, Granther. Does that mean anything to you? Molly? Barbara? "

" 'The bringers of brightness,' " Molly re-

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peated. "It sounds as though it ought to, but — no, I'm afraid it doesn't."

"Then how about 'that which is highest'?" Ruth asked again.

"Oh, I know!" Babs cried suddenly. "That word at the top there — 'mountains.' Is it something to do with that?"

"No, but you're getting warm," Ruth answered. "Now the last — 'the one of all most miserable.' That was where I started — at the very end. Do you see it now? Any of you?"

They stared obediently but without result. "I think you've proved your point quite conclusively, dear," Dr. Curtis said at last. "None of us have the faintest idea of how to read your riddle. Are you ready to tell us now?"

Ruth drew a long breath. With a hand that she tried in vain to steady, she laid a finger on a 'happiness' character at about the height of her shoulders in the third of the four columns.

"Look at this one. Do you see what's on each side of it? The 'moon' here, and the 'sun' there. And — do you see the one above? It's the 'heaven' symbol. And below is the 'beggar.' And now — listen again.

"For where shall happiness lie, save between

the bringers of brightness' — the sun and moon!
 'And below that which is highest' — heaven is
 higher than the mountain, Babs. 'And above
 the one of all most miserable' — surely that's a
 beggar. And here's 'happiness' right in the
 middle."

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"But, Ruth, my dear, this is remarkable!"
 Dr. Curtis bent forward to scan the symbols
 closely. "Yes, I should say there was no doubt
 about it. Congratulations, my dear! Your
 education in the subtleties of Oriental imagery
 has been most successful, after all. If only our
 good Wang could be here now, he would be
 deeply gratified."

"Thanks, Granther," Ruth pressed his hand.
 "But wait; that isn't all. Do you remember
 the last line? Wang underlined it to show how

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important it was. ‘*Yet shall it not be thine until thou hast thrust it from thee!*’ Watch!” She put her two hands on the ‘happiness’ character and pushed it gently.

With a gasp of surprise, the watchers saw that the whole third column of writing moved back into the wall a full inch.

“This is as far as I got,” Ruth confessed tremulously. “I don’t know what it means. I’m almost afraid to look. Besides, I wanted you all with me. Granther, do you think I ought to do this? Did Wang want me to?”

“I am sure he did, my dear,” the old gentleman answered steadily. “He gave you the riddle, remember. You are only carrying out his wishes. Don’t be afraid.”

“Well, then.” Ruth satisfied herself that the panel would not move back any farther. She slipped her slender fingers into the crack at one side and pushed again. Smoothly, noiselessly, the entire panel slid aside, leaving an opening its entire width and running from floor to ceiling.



SMOOTHLY, NOISELESSLY, THE ENTIRE PANEL SLID ASIDE

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE SECRET SHRINE

The lower part of the space, from the floor up, was empty, showing the bare boards of the outside wall. But at a height of about three feet from the ground a shelf had been fixed, and upon this was arranged an elaborate but miniature shrine.

A screen of gilded wood, intricately carved, formed the background. Before this, on a series of shallow steps, stood a gilded wooden tablet about a foot high. The tablet was inscribed in red and black lettering. Graceful pottery incense-burners stood on each side, and the little nook still held a faint smoky odor. Before the tablet stood a cup which had once contained tea and a little green bowl holding a withered orange.

Neither Molly nor Babs had ever seen anything in the least like it before, and they turned to Ruth for an explanation.

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“ This was poor Wang’s praying-place,” she said, with tears in her voice. “ And to think he hid it away all these years! Why, he must have known he didn’t have to do that! ”

“ It shows his honorable feelings, Ruth,” Dr. Curtis said gently. “ Many Christian families would have objected to the practice of what they consider a heathen religion under their roof, and Wang was scrupulously anxious not to offend. He may have felt that, in a small town like this, we would have been criticized for permitting it, even though we had no objection ourselves. You and I, Ruthie, I am sure, have nothing but respect for Wang’s loyalty to his faith, but some of our neighbors might have thought differently. I think he was very wise.”

“ Well, I certainly shouldn’t have minded,” Ruth insisted. “ Wang was one of the best men I ever knew, and, if he wanted to say his prayers before a memorial tablet to his ancestors, it’s all right with me.”

“ Is that what that red and gold thing is? ” Molly asked. “ I’ve been wondering. Isn’t the carving beautiful? And I suppose the tea and the orange were offerings.”

“ I suppose so. I don’t know much about Chinese Buddhism, either,” Ruth replied.

They stood a moment in silence, admiring Wang’s handiwork, and then Barbara ventured, “ But, Ruth, I’m afraid I don’t quite see the point, even yet. Wang’s riddle was meant to lead you to the shrine; that’s plain. But now you’ve solved it and you’re here. And — well, what I mean is, what next? What’s it all for, anyway? ”

Ruth’s eyes were fixed upon the little altar, and her voice was almost a whisper as she answered, “ I think I know, Babs. Look! ” She pointed to something which had just caught her attention, something which the others had not yet noticed.

It was a tiny box of pinkish-white jade, not much larger than a safety-match box, and it rested on the gilded platform which supported the tablet. Very carefully Ruth reached in and withdrew it.

“ Oh, how beautiful! ” she exclaimed involuntarily.

The four sides were a masterpiece of delicate carving, showing a Chinese landscape with the Great Wall always in the background. There

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were mountains and lakes, palaces and gardens, with tiny human figures at work and at play. The Emperor rode in state, carried in a palanquin; soldiers with banners marched before him. It was all on so small a scale that it strained the eye to look at it; yet every slightest detail was perfect. The top of the box was plain, showing the exquisite veining of the polished stone; in the very center a mandarin's Great Seal was deeply engraved.

"Oh, it's lovely, but open it, quick!" Barbara begged. "I can't wait! Ruth, do you think it is —"

Ruth's shaking fingers fumbled vainly at the lid. "Granter, help me!" she appealed breathlessly.

"I think, if you press the Great Seal, it will release the spring," the Doctor suggested. "Your father sent me a similar box many years ago, and that was the principle upon which it operated."

Quickly Ruth followed his suggestion, and under her fingers the lid slipped back in its groove. Eagerly the others craned forward.

Upon a bed of imperial-blue velvet lay seven perfect pearls, knotted on a thread of faded

crimson silk. Twilight was settling over the pagoda, and they gleamed with an incredibly soft luster in the dimness.

For a moment no one spoke. Then Molly breathed softly, "The pearls of heaven!"

Babs snorted. "You *would* say something poetic, Sis! Me, I'm utterly speechless, for once. All I can think is that Sailor Jim certainly knew his oysters!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE DRAGON STRIKES

Dinner, or a pretense of dinner, had been eaten. Mrs. Bronson, returning from the shop in ignorance of the afternoon's exciting happenings, had heard the story and had been taken to see the secret shrine.

And now the two elders and the three girls were gathered in Dr. Curtis' study to talk the whole thing over.

Dr. Curtis sat, as usual, at his desk. Mrs. Bronson had taken the deep leather armchair. Molly and Babs were side by side on the old leather divan, and Ruth sat in her own little rocking-chair by the long French window. All the windows in this room opened upon the veranda and stood ajar for coolness.

"You do think Wang meant to give the pearls to me, Granther?" Ruth asked anxiously. "After all, he didn't say so."

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“ I think there can be no doubt of it, my dear, although I fancy the giver is rather the mandarin Chu Hi. As I understand it, Wang was acting as his agent all along. The mandarin wished you to be educated in his language in order that you might carry on the traditional position of his family as Keepers of the Wall. I must confess that I am rather puzzled as to what practical plan he had in mind, but — ”

“ I think I know that, Granther,” Ruth interposed. “ Molly and Babs figured it out for me,” with a grateful glance at them. “ You see,” she went on rather hesitantly, “ Wang and I used to talk a lot about — well, we pretended that somehow or other I might manage to take a medical course and go out to China and go on with *their* work — Mother’s and Daddy’s, you know. Of course it’s an impossible plan, but I think Chu Hi thought it could be done.”

To her relief, the old Doctor took this surprising announcement quite calmly. “ A very worthy ambition, my dear. You say that Wang encouraged you? He approved of your taking up medical work in his country? ”

“ Oh, yes! ” Ruth breathed more freely

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now. "He suggested it, really. And we think the mandarin told him to."

"It was their ambition for you, then?" he asked keenly. "Not your own?"

"It was my own, too. I might not have thought of it alone, but, ever since I can remember, I've wanted to do it more than anything else in the world."

"You never spoke of this dream to me, child," the old man said with gentle reproach, and Ruth flushed.

"It was only a dream, Granther. What was the use of bothering you with it? I knew that we couldn't afford it — four years at college, and a three year medical course after that! You've brought me up to be practical, darling, to 'cut my coat according to my cloth,' as you always said. As soon as I was old enough to figure what it would cost, I put the whole thing out of my head. And besides, even if there weren't the money difficulty, there was another one. I'd never, never go so far away and leave you here all alone."

"Spoken like my sweet, unselfish girl!" Dr. Curtis said tenderly. "But, Ruthie —" there was an unexpected twinkle in his blue eyes

now — “has it occurred to you that I might not necessarily be left here alone? Sinai College is not far away; you would be able to spend your week-ends and holidays with me, as your father did. And as for later, when you set sail on your mission — well, I must confess that I’ve always longed to see the Chinese hospital which bears my son’s name.”

“Granter! You mean that you’d come to China with me? Oh, you precious old darling, I never even thought of that!” Ruth rushed over to hug him ecstatically.

“And your other objection, Ruth, no longer exists,” Mrs. Bronson observed, smiling. “These pearls will just about blot the words ‘can’t afford’ from your vocabulary.”

“Ruth!” Molly exclaimed suddenly. “I’ve just thought of something. They *are* the pearls of heaven! I mean — you know that was what Wang called knowledge. These pearls stand for the money that will buy you knowledge, Chinese and American both. They’ll pay for your education at Sinai, won’t they, Mumsy?”

Mrs. Bronson laughed. “I’m not a gem expert, honey. But these pearls are of good size, perfect, and perfectly matched. From the lit-

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tle I know of such things, there's a greater fortune here in this little box than any of you seem to realize. It appalls me to think that they were lying out there in the back yard all this time! Why, any one might have taken them!"

"Hardly, I think," the Doctor answered comfortably. "We know of one ruffian who made a thorough search for them without any success. No wonder Jim was willing to tear the pagoda apart, girls. He'd seen the jewels, remember, and knew something of their worth."

"I suppose the mandarin sent them to Wang to give me, so he could be sure my education would go on when Wang left," Ruth said musingly. "And Wang wasn't certain that I was worthy of it, so he hid them in the shrine and gave me the riddle to work out. I wonder what would have happened to them if I'd never succeeded."

"Why, that's just it," Molly answered her. "He knew you *would* succeed, or he'd never have taken the chance. He did have faith in you, Ruth, all the time."

"And just wanted to prod you into doing a little original thinking," Babs finished maliciously. "Never mind, dearest, you pulled it

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off, and we're all proud of you. What are you going to do with the pearls of heaven to-night? I'm afraid I won't be able to sleep a wink with all that wealth in the house."

Ruth glanced lovingly at the box, where it lay on a small table at her elbow. It was open, and the rays of the lamplight touched the treasure to a soft, lovely glow.

"Oh, we'll just lock them up in Granther's desk for the night," she said easily. "They'll be perfectly safe; no one would think of looking for jewels here. To-morrow we'll take them down to the bank, don't you think, Granther?"

"Yes, that will be best," he answered. "I want Mr. Hein, the jeweler, to see them, too. He'll be able to give us an idea of their value, though I expect they'll have to be taken to the city when it comes to disposing of them. Hein will tell me how to go about that."

"We're not going to sell the box," Ruth proclaimed. "It's too darling. I'm going to keep it always to remember Wang by."

"It's always Wang, never Chu Hi, with you, isn't it, Ruth?" Molly said. "And, after all, it's the mandarin, really, who is your good fairy."

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“ I know ; I keep forgetting,” Ruth replied. “ It’s because he *is* just a sort of far-away good fairy, while dear old Wang is a real person to me. But of course I am grateful to Chu Hi, and I’m going to show it by doing everything he wanted me to do. Babs! What *is* the matter? ”

For Barbara had interrupted with a sudden shriek so wild, so startling, that every face turned toward her.

“ The — the hand! ” she gasped now. “ With the creepy, crawly dragon — oh, it was horrible! Didn’t any of you see it? There, through the window — oh, Mumsy, I’m so frightened! ”

Her mother rose and hurried to her. “ There, there, darling, you’re imagining things. No one’s here but us. Hush, dear, you mustn’t — Why, Molly! ”

For her older daughter, too, had given a frightened exclamation. “ Look! ” she cried chokingly. “ The jade box — it’s gone! ”

CHAPTER XX

STRANGE ARE THE WAYS OF HEAVEN

“It must have fallen to the floor — look under the table, Ruthie,” the old Doctor urged helplessly. “No one could have taken it. It’s preposterous!”

“But I *saw* him, Doctor,” Babs insisted. “At least, I saw the hand. None of you were looking that way, and he didn’t make a sound. He must have been out there on the veranda all the time, and the window was open — he just reached in — oh, don’t let’s waste time in here! Maybe we can catch him yet!” She was half out of the window, dancing with impatience.

Ruth and Molly straightened from their hasty search of the floor. “It isn’t here, Granther,” Ruth said breathlessly. “Babs must be right, though I don’t see how — come on, every one. Let’s search the yard.”

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The old Doctor met Mrs. Bronson's eyes and shook his head. "This is a job for the police, my dear. None of us here is equipped for a hand-to-hand struggle in the dark with Sailor Jim."

He drew the desk telephone toward him.

"Sailor Jim!" Ruth exclaimed. "Why, he's gone! You don't think he —"

"He didn't go far, Ruth," Barbara interrupted. "And it was his hand; I'd know that dragon anywhere."

While the Doctor rapidly gave his report to police headquarters, Babs told Ruth what they had been too excited to tell her before — that Sailor Jim had not left Pleasant Hill, but had secured employment in their immediate neighborhood.

She had just finished as the Doctor replaced the receiver on the hook.

"You're not to worry, Ruth," he said. "The sergeant is sending two men here at once with instructions to search the neighborhood. Jim can't have gone far; he'll be hiding in some alley if he hasn't sneaked back to his quarters in the Judge's garage. I'd like to know if he realized that you recognized his hand, Barbara."

If he did not, the officers will find him in his bed, very indignant at being disturbed. We may be sure of that."

"Well, he'll have something to be indignant about before we're through with him!" Babs exclaimed. "The impudence of it — reaching through the window and snatching Ruth's treasure right out from under her nose. Aren't you furious, Ruthie?"

"I'm just beginning to be," replied Ruth. "At first, I was so astonished I didn't have room for anything else. I still can't figure it out. How did Sailor Jim know we'd be sitting here to-night with the jade box on the table where he could reach it? We didn't know it ourselves until just before dinner. And a little earlier than that we didn't even know there *was* a treasure!"

"Well, he had the advantage of us there," Dr. Curtis answered. "He knew about the pearls all along and meant to possess them. And I don't think his being here to-night was an accident. He found a job in the neighborhood so that he could keep a watch on our house. Wouldn't you say that was the way of it, Mrs. Bronson?"

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“ It seems quite certain,” she agreed. “ Your veranda all around the house makes spying easy, Doctor. I shouldn’t be surprised to learn that Jim had been skulking around here every evening since you sent him away. He knew that the pearls would be found sooner or later, and he meant to be on hand. I don’t think, though, that he expected you to make it so easy for him, Ruth. If you’d not left them so temptingly within reach, he’d probably have waited till we were in bed, and attempted to break in and steal them then.”

“ Oh, I know it’s all my fault,” Ruth answered remorsefully. “ I don’t know how I could have been so careless. But I never dreamed — ”

“ Well, can’t we *do* something? ” Babs burst out. “ We’re just sitting here talking, and all the time that creature is getting farther away with the jewels. I must say I don’t think much of your Pleasant Hill police! Why, in the city they’d have had a squad car tearing up to the house in no time.”

“ I’m afraid we’re not so well prepared to deal with crime out here, Barbara,” the Doctor answered mildly. “ Perhaps because we’re

not so often called upon to do so. I think, however — listen, what are those sounds outside? ”

He stepped toward the window, and the others crowded after him.

The shadowy veranda was empty, but from beyond, around the corner toward the front of the house, came the scuffle of feet, mingled with grunts of pain and angry exclamations in a familiar voice.

“ Sailor Jim! They’ve got him! ” Babs exclaimed delightedly.

Footsteps and voices drew nearer, and they all strained forward, their eyes trying to pierce the gloom.

Two figures were rounding the corner of the house. One of them grasped the other firmly by the collar and seemed to be half dragging, half pushing him along. And this other, resisting with every step, turning and twisting and trying to strike out at his captor, was protesting in the hoarse voice of Sailor Jim.

Almost in the same moment there came a loud peal at the front door. It is doubtful if any member of the group in the study even heard it. Every eye, every thought, was centered on the spectacle at the window.

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The light from the room fell fully upon the two outside now, and Ruth gave a startled cry at what she saw.

Sailor Jim's collar was torn and flapping, his coarse black hair was all awry, and a little trickle of blood ran from a cut lip.

His captor presented almost as distressing an appearance. His clothing, too, was disheveled, and a rapidly swelling bruise disfigured his right eye. But he was calm and smiling, and he held the wretched Jim in a grasp of iron as he thrust him through the window and followed without relaxing his grip.

"It is not seemly that the scholar should engage in brawling with the lowly born," he observed serenely. "Yet strange are the ways of Heaven, and only the coward's feet shrink from walking therein. Will the Illustrious One graciously permit this insect to pollute his presence for a moment's space?"

"Wang!" Ruth ran to him and impetuously threw her arms around his neck. "Wang — you've come back!"

"A moment, Little Flower." His eyes were soft and very tender as he smiled at her, but his hands were fully occupied with the pris-



HIS HANDS WERE FULLY OCCUPIED WITH THE PRISONER - *Page 198*

oner. "When this poisonous viper is safely bestowed —"

"Hey, for the love of Mike, what's goin' on here?"

Officer Riley and his team-mate stood in the doorway, their honest red faces agape with amazement. Receiving no answer to their ring and finding the front door unlocked, they had pushed their way through the house and had entered the study unnoticed.

Dr. Curtis wheeled about and welcomed them with relief. "Thank heaven you've come, men! There's your prisoner, and mighty glad we are to hand him over. Watch out for him; he's a slippery customer."

"Don't worry, Doc; he won't get away from us." Officer Riley advanced and seized Jim's arm in a practised grip. As Wang stepped back, the policeman surveyed him suspiciously.

"How about the other one, Doc? Hadn't I better take the Chink down, too? Chances are they was both in it and fell out over the divvy. Let's see, it was some jools you said was missin', wasn't it? Seen anything of 'em?"

Ignoring the policeman with lofty disdain, Wang took the little jade box from his pocket

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and handed it to Dr. Curtis. Then, speaking pointedly to the Doctor alone, he made his explanation.

“It was my privilege to approach your honored dwelling some few moments ago, Illustrious One. As I drew near, I observed this person emerging from the gate. He ran silently, keeping in the shadows, and had the appearance of an evil-doer. I stepped back into the shadow of a tree, and, as he approached me, I put forth my foot and caused him to fall to the ground. This box, which I had reason to know as the property of my young mistress, was clutched in his unclean hand. He resisted my efforts to take it from him, and I was forced to engage in physical combat with the creature. I then compelled him to accompany me here, that he might make such apologies as were fitting.”

Wang bowed deeply to Dr. Curtis and stepped back, but the old Doctor seized his hand and shook it warmly.

“That was mighty good work, Wang! And you mustn’t be offended at what Officer Riley just said. He didn’t know. Wang has been a member of my household for many years,

Riley, and he's as devoted to my granddaughter and me as we are to him. He's done your job for you to-night, and, considering the time it took you to get here, I seriously doubt whether the robber would have been caught if he hadn't."

Officer Riley was completely crushed. "Say, Doc, I did put my foot in it, didn't I? We got here as quick as we could, but we had a little trouble with the flivver. Well," he turned to Wang, "I guess I got to apologize, all right. I remember you now, of course; seen you workin' around the place here many's the time. But what with that shiner you've got — say, you ought to put some beefsteak on that right off, feller!"

"Your solicitude is most gracious," Wang answered solemnly. "There is no resentment in my heart. One does not reproach the mule because his ears are long."

"Uh, well — I guess you're right. We'll be goin' now, Doc. Robbery's the charge, I take it? We'll lock this bird up for the night and let you hear from us in the mornin'. Come on, you!"

Sailor Jim had stood silent and sullen ever

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since Wang brought him into the room. He did not speak now, but, with a last malignant glance at Wang, he was hurried away between the two policemen.

CHAPTER XXI

“ ALL FOR ONE ” AND —

“ And now, Wang, tell us *everything!* ”

Over his protests, Ruth had insisted on her old friend sitting in an easy chair while she bathed his bruised eye and bound it up with a cooling lotion.

“ Everything is much, Little Flower,” he answered with a smile. “ This unworthy one has not yet progressed to such heights of knowledge.”

“ Oh, Wang, you’re so provoking! You know what I mean. Everything about yourself. Did you actually go all the way to China? And wasn’t Chu Hi ill, after all? Or did he get well? And — oh, this is the most important! Are you here to stay? Don’t say you’re going back again; I just couldn’t stand it. You don’t know how I’ve missed you, Wang! ”

“ The words of the Little Flower are sweet

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to these old ears," he answered gratefully. "My revered master, the mandarin Chu Hi, has ascended the Dragon. It was the privilege of this lowly servant to close his honorable eyes. May his soul find peace!"

"Oh, Wang, I'm sorry!" Ruth answered. "We know how you loved him. Though I was too little to remember him, I've always been grateful for his kindness to me and to my parents — we've always felt that he was a dear friend, haven't we, Granther?"

"We have, indeed," the old man answered. "You have our deepest sympathy, Wang. It is a blessing that you reached his bedside in time to see him again."

Wang inclined his head. "Heaven was kind beyond my poor deserts. The end came quickly, on the third day after I reached the monastery."

"Then you didn't have to become a monk — to look after him, I mean?" Ruth asked. "You know you told us you expected to do that. That's why I was so surprised to see you again; I didn't think you could ever come back."

"Such was not necessary, and it is as well. For as the illustrious Chu Hi drew near to

Heaven, he was granted increased wisdom, and to his clear-seeingness it was revealed that his servant's place is in this house. There is a task to do which is not yet complete, and he would have me devote my days to bringing his dearest hope to its flowering, if such is the will of Heaven.”

“ Oh, Wang, you're going to stay, then? ” Barbara had told herself that she must keep still and let Ruth and Wang have their first little visit out, but her capacity for remaining silent had its limits. “ But that'll be wonderful! You'll be here with the Doctor while Ruthie goes to college, and — oh, I forgot! Is Ruthie going to college now? What did Chu Hi say she must do? ”

There was distinct astonishment on Wang's usually expressionless face, and Molly hastened to explain.

“ Ruth told us all about everything, Wang — about how Chu Hi wanted her to have a Chinese education and be a Keeper of the Wall because he had no children of his own. You aren't cross with her for telling us? We thought it was a wonderful plan. Of course it wasn't any of our business, but — ”

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“ Surely I am not cross, little one,” Wang answered gently. “ And the business of our friends is always our business, if we be true friends. Little Flower is an American young lady, and it is well that she should take counsel with her own kind. You feel that my master’s plan was a feasible one? ”

“ Well, I’ll tell you, Wang,” Molly answered slowly. “ I think Chu Hi was absolutely right in thinking that Ruth should know something of what the Chinese know if she is to make a success of hospital work among them. We Americans are too likely to think our ways are the only right ways, and we offend foreigners sometimes by ignoring *their* ideas. But I don’t think that a Chinese education is the most important thing for her. I don’t think it’s a bit more important than what she’ll learn at college here. I really don’t, Wang! ”

She glanced at him rather fearfully as she finished, and was relieved when he answered with real respect, “ You speak wisely, little one. So spoke my master as the shadow of the Dragon fell upon him. The old learning and the new, he said, are but parts of the perfect whole.”

“ He does want her to go to college, then? ”
Babs asked in rather a puzzled voice.

“ Even so. The noble Chu Hi put no constraint upon the Little Flower. She is free to do as she wills. But it was his wish that she, having tasted of the old wisdom at my unworthy hands, should now drink from the fountain which flows in your country. It was for this purpose that the revered one caused the pearls to be conveyed hither by that unspeakable worm who called himself Sailor Jim. Again let me say, however, that the choice is with her. She is not bound, either now or when her days of pupilship are ended. But, if she chooses then to return to the land of her birth and serve its unhappy people in the manner of her honored parents, then shall the mandarin’s dying prayer be fulfilled.”

“ It’s what I’m going to do, Wang,” Ruth answered solemnly. “ I’ve wanted to always; you know that. And, oh, Wang, I’m so sorry — I’ve just been waiting for a chance to tell you how sorry I am that I didn’t understand before! I was stupid, I know. I never connected my Chinese lessons with our plans. If you’d only *told* me — ”

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“It was not the master’s will,” Wang answered with simple finality. “Many times the ways of wisdom appear dark to the un-instructed, Little Flower, but light comes always at the end of the path.”

“Well, I’m glad it’s come at last!” Ruth answered thankfully. “Everything’s all cleared up now, and I can see my way ahead. College, and medical school after, and Granther here in the old house with you to look after him — and, Wang, we’ll all go back to China together. You and Granther and me!”

“May it be so!” he answered with his grave smile, and for a moment his hand rested upon her head in silent blessing. Then, more lightly, he said, “I have not yet asked, Little Flower, the question to which I know the answer. You found it easy to read my riddle?”

“Easy?” Ruth gave a rueful little laugh. “Wang, I worried with it day and night all summer long. And studied — you don’t know how I studied! I’ve been through every one of the books you gave me, and I really worked this time.”

“That is good. But you did not find the answer in the books?”

“ No, I found it — well, I don’t know how. Guesswork, I suppose. Or — what was that you said I might have? Woman’s instinct. I think that was what really led me to the answer, Wang.”

“ It was so that I planned,” he answered musingly. “ The hiding-place had not been disturbed? ”

“ Oh, no, the pearls were perfectly safe, in spite of Sailor Jim. We only found them to-day.”

“ Don’t say ‘ we ’; say ‘ I,’ Ruth,” Molly put in. “ She did it all by herself, Wang. The Doctor will tell you. We were all there, but we weren’t any help at all.”

“ It is very good,” Wang beamed upon his pupil. “ But this evil one, this Sailor Jim — how is it that I find him here, a thief? Our encounter afforded no opportunity for explanations. I had thought that he had returned to the sea long since.”

“ Then you *didn’t* send him to us? ” Babs demanded eagerly. “ I told you so, girls! ”

“ *I* send that unspeakable wretch here? What is this story? ”

“ He said you did, Wang,” Barbara an-

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swered. "He came — oh, it must have been about a month after you'd gone. And he said you asked him to because you were worried about Ruth and the Doctor's living here without a strong man to protect them. He just moved right in and took over your job, and none of us wanted him! And he got to making a perfect nuisance of himself about the pagoda — wanted to hang around there all the time and got perfectly furious when Ruthie locked him out!"

For the first time the girls saw Wang's dark skin turn pale. "I had no thought of this! I committed the pearls to the guardianship of the shrine, never dreaming that they would be sought by any but the Little Flower herself. Truly, I have been an ignorant and careless servant of my master!"

"Oh, but you couldn't know, Wang." Ruth hastened to console him. "And the pearls *were* safe, in spite of all Jim could do. Do you know he tried to get Granther to tear down the pagoda so he could look for them?"

"I blame myself most bitterly," Wang answered. "I knew this man to be evil and crazed with greed, but I did not dream that he

would dare so much. Doubtless the news he brought that the illustrious Chu Hi was passing into the shadows emboldened his craven heart.”

“ Did you tell him you were leaving the pearls for Ruth, Wang? ” Molly asked. “ We’ve always been curious about that.”

“ I do not give my confidence to such cattle! ” he answered contemptuously. “ But — a letter from the noble one accompanied the jewels. Doubtless he found an opportunity to acquaint himself with the contents, in which it was stated that the pearls were for the Little Flower. Would that I had delivered them to her in the instant of receiving! But I had a doubting heart; I was not sure that my master’s task had been well accomplished, and so I devised the plan you know. You will forgive me, Little Flower and Learned Doctor, for having unwittingly brought distress into your household? ”

“ Oh, of course we forgive you, Wang,” Ruth answered warmly. “ It wasn’t your fault, any of it, and, anyway, no harm was done. Let’s forget Sailor Jim, sha’n’t we? ”

“ It shall be as you say,” he answered.

Dr. Curtis rose a little stiffly and glanced at the clock.

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“Do you girls know that it’s well past midnight? Wang has had a long journey, with a battle at the end of it. I think you’ll have to postpone the rest of your questions and answers till to-morrow.”

CHAPTER XXII

“ONE FOR ALL!”

Breakfast was scarcely over on the following morning when the three girls sought Wang in the kitchen, where he had serenely taken up his duties again.

“Let the dishes go this once, Wang, and come out to the pagoda with us,” Ruth coaxed. “I want to show you what I can do with the books *now*. I’ve been so afraid I’d never get a chance to show you, and, now that you’re really here, I can’t wait another minute!”

The Chinese turned from the sink with an affectionate smile. (“How could I ever have thought his face looked wooden?” Babs asked herself.) “It shall be as you wish, Little Flower. He that is a slave to small duties is no master of greater ones.”

Ruth drew him eagerly down the path, the two sisters following. The little pagoda

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looked very friendly and welcoming in the early sunlight, and a deep peace flooded the Chinaman's calm face as he bent to enter the door.

Proudly Ruth dragged the books from the chest and plunged into a display of her progress. Wang smiled now and then as he gently corrected some error, but it was plain that he was both surprised and pleased at the results of her summer work.

When she had finished and received his commendation, Barbara said plaintively, "I could bear to do a little showing off, too. Or will you take my word for it, Wang? Anyway, you'll be surprised to know that Sis and I have learned a little Chinese, ourselves."

"Oh, yes, Wang, I forgot to tell you!" Ruth interrupted. "Molly and Babs have studied with me, and they know about as much as I do. It was their own idea — to keep me at it, I guess — and it did. You never saw anything like the way these girls have stuck to me through everything, Wang! I never dreamed friends could be like that!"

"But we *wanted* to learn, too, Ruth," Molly said gently. "It wasn't just for you; it was for ourselves. Don't give us too much credit!"

We loved your books, Wang. I'm only sorry we couldn't get any farther. I've been wondering," she went on shyly. "You're going to begin teaching Ruth again, aren't you? To prepare her for the Chinese part of her college course? Would it be a nuisance, taking Babs and me on, too?"

"This unworthy one would esteem it an honor," Wang answered, and they knew from his voice that he was deeply touched. "It is precious to feel that the wisdom of my country is valued by Western hearts. At your request my soul sings, little one."

"Oh, that's grand!" Ruth exclaimed. "Honestly, girls — it's silly, I know. But we've been so close together that I don't feel that I could be happy doing *anything* without you two! I can't even remember what it was like before you came! They've been the *darlingest* friends, Wang! Dearer than sisters, more like — like —"

"I know — like the Three Musketeers," Babs supplied. "'One for all, all for one!' That's the kind of pals we three are, isn't it, Ruthie?"

"That's exactly it," Ruth answered grate-

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fully. "Only I'm afraid it's been mostly 'all for one,' and I was the one! You two have spent the whole summer worrying with my troubles, and I haven't done a thing for you —"

"Oh, but you have, Ruth!" Molly said quickly. "You — and Wang — yes, and Sailor Jim! — have given us the most thrilling, exciting summer we've ever known. It's been just like living in the middle of a moving picture, and we've loved every minute of it. Especially this last reel, where we come to the happy ending!"

"I wouldn't have missed a second!" Babs agreed. "Even the part where I saw the dragon-hand steal in and vanish with the jade box — and I'm not claiming I enjoyed *that* much at the time! I *am* glad it all came out right for you, though, Ruthie dear."

"It never would have if you hadn't helped," Ruth insisted. "I told you that I worked the riddle all by myself, Wang, but perhaps you wouldn't think so if you knew everything that led up to it. There were so many places where I was completely lost, and then something one of the girls said put me on the right track — Why, just imagine, I didn't even know your

note *was* a riddle till Molly discovered it! And it was Barbara's ‘ uninstructed eye ’ which noticed the ‘ happiness ’ signs and made me guess that the riddle led to the wall there. I *know* I could never have done it without them, Wang! ”

“ True friends are the choicest gift of Heaven,” Wang quoted. “ A question looks out from your eyes, Little Flower. Will you not speak? ”

“ Oh, not now, Wang,” Ruth answered hastily. “ Later, if I can have a little talk with you — ”

“ The present is ours to command, but the future is veiled in darkness. Speak now, Little Flower, and have no fear.”

“ Well, all right. I've been trying to tell you, Wang, how much Molly and Babs helped me. I *can't* tell you, really; there were so many little things that don't sound like much, but that meant — oh, just everything! ” Her voice was very earnest, and she fixed imploring eyes upon her old friend. “ You've settled my future for me, Wang. All my worries are cleared away; I'm going to do the thing I've always wanted most. But — well, don't you think — ”

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“Ruth, please!” Molly leaned forward apprehensively.

Wang smiled at her and held up his hand for silence. “You wish, Little Flower —” he turned again to Ruth. “Knowing your own future secure, you wish to make that of your friends secure also? It is a noble thought. The pearls are yours to do with as you wish.”

“Wang, you *darling!*” Ruth turned a radiant face toward the sisters. “You said one day, Babs, that you two had decided not to go to college if it meant a sacrifice to your mother. Now — you won’t have to worry about that any more. Maybe — oh, maybe you could come to Sinai College with me! They have wonderful courses in almost anything you want to study. Oh, I’d love that! We wouldn’t be separated for years and years. But, anyway, wherever you want to go, Wang’s pearls will take care of everything. If —”

“Of course we’ll go to Sinai, Ruthie!” Babs exclaimed eagerly. “Won’t we, Sis?”

Molly hesitated. “It’s dear of you, Ruth, but I don’t know — maybe Mumsy won’t want us to take such a *big* thing from you —”

Her voice sounded so distressed that Wang

hastened to reassure her. “ Have no fear, little one. The heart of your lady mother will approve the offering of friendship. Of that I feel certain.”

“ And so do I,” Ruth said. “ Especially when she knows that you earned it as much as I did. Oh, I’m so *glad!* ” She gave a heart-felt sigh of relief. “ I thought of this the minute I found the pearls, and I knew that all the joy of the whole thing would be taken out of it for me if I couldn’t do it. But I wasn’t sure at first that they were really mine, and I meant to talk it over with Granther before I said anything. And then Wang came, and I knew I’d have to ask him — though I might have known what he’d say, bless his generous old heart! Oh — why, where did he go? ”

Wang had slipped quietly away, leaving the three girls alone in the pagoda.

With eyes that were a little misty, Ruth drew her two friends to her. Silently she turned them about until they faced the painted wall. They had not opened the shutters, and the little pagoda was in shadow, but a beam of sunlight from the open door fell full upon the ‘ happiness ’ sign which covered the hidden shrine.

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“ ‘ Wouldst thou find happiness? ’ ” Ruth quoted very softly. “ Now, all together, girls! ”

And clear and sweet on the summer air rose the fresh young voices.

“ All for one — one for all! ”

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